

Protective Factors in Children's Adjustment to Divorce

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ABSTRACT

The unprecedented increase of divorce rate in the Mainland China in the past two decades has drawn much academic concern especially on the impact of divorce on children. Yet most studies on the children of divorce over-focused on children's maladjustment and divorce-related risk factors. There was little exploration on the protective factors that facilitate children's positive adaptation in the post-divorce life. Furthermore, the widely adopted quantitative approach of the previous studies was criticized for ignoring children's agency.

To bridge the knowledge gap, this study aimed at exploring protective factors in children's divorce adjustment. With a resilience perspective, the researcher held that children's positive adjustment to divorce is possible, given that there are adequate protective factors to deal with the divorce-related risks. The use of qualitative approach enabled the researcher to listen to children's voice. Seven adolescents aged from 16 years old to 18 years old were interviewed in Shanghai. Criterion sampling was used for the study. The most important criterion is that informants are currently "doing okay" based on their self-perceptions or parents and teachers' appraisals. Drawing from their subjective experience, significant protective factors and the mechanisms they work to protect the children were explored.

The rich life stories of the seven informants evidenced the resilience process of children's adjustment to parental divorce. The common protective factors identified included love and concern from at least one parent, financial support from relatives and non-kin, emotional support from relatives and non-kin, peer support, children's own abilities in coping with emotional distresses. The identified protective factors

either directly eliminated or reduced the risk factors, or compensated the damage caused by risk factors. It is interesting to note that a particular protective factor may work out its protective function through more than one way.

In comparison with the resources available for children in post-divorce families in the West, resources and support for children identified in this study concentrated at the individual and family level with inadequate support from community. The strong family-kin support and the weak community support could be traced back to the particular cultural, structural and legal context in China

Results of the study indicated that divorce should be re-conceptualized as an additional stage of family transition or family development. Similar to other family transitions such as new marriage or parenthood, successful adaptation calls for tremendous personal strengths and social support. Public education is needed to initiate ideological changes, that is, de-labeling of divorce and post-divorce families, promotion of the concept of “forever parenthood” and flexible role in family arrangement. Much advocacy work will have to be done to promote legal reform and policy changes. Much will have to be done in lobbying government’s support in the development of supportive services for post-divorce families. Lastly, in working with children and family, a holistic practice model is proposed. The model calls for interventions at individual, family and community levels.

中文摘要

在中國大陸，過去的二十年離婚率一直居高不下，學術界也因運而生了大量對離婚現象的研究。其中，大部分研究都報告了離婚所帶來的負面結果，包括離婚帶來的風險和困難，及其對子女造成的傷害。幾乎沒有研究涉及子女如何從父母離婚的打擊中復原的過程（resilience process），更缺乏對在這一過程中促進當事人正向適應的保護性因素（protective factors）的探索。此外，大部分國內的研究都運用了定量的方法，導致了孩子的聲音在相關研究中被忽略。

鑒於以上不足，本研究旨在運用復原力視角(resilience perspective)，探詢協助子女正向適應父母離婚的保護性因素。研究者相信，在給予孩子足夠的保護性因素以抗衡危險性因素(risk factors)的負面影響時，正向的適應是可以達到的。研究者運用定性方法傾聽孩子所思所想。在選取研究對象時，研究者運用了效標抽樣（criterion sampling），訪談了 7 個居住在上海，童年父母離婚，目前適應狀況良好，年齡在 16 至 18 歲之間的青少年。

這七位青少年獨特的人生經歷向我們展示了子女適應父母離婚後生活的過程。回顧過往，他們列舉了對他們有幫助的保護性因素，其中較普遍的包括：來自至少一方父母的愛和關懷，來自親屬或非親屬的經濟資助，來自親屬或非親屬的情感支援，個人處理負面情緒的能力。這些保護性因素或者直接消除或減少危險性因素，或者彌補危險性因素造成的負面影響。有個別保護性因素則同時發揮以上兩種作用。

研究者發現，與西方社會已有研究相比，在本研究中支援孩子適應的保護性因素主要集中在個人和家庭層面，在社區方面的支援幾乎不存在。這樣一種現象可以歸結於中國大陸社會特有的文化背景，政治體制和法律制度。

綜上，研究者認為，離婚應當被理解為家庭在發展過程中的一個特殊階段。

正如新婚或者迎接初生兒的家庭一樣，離婚家庭以及家庭成員的適應既需要個人的努力也需要外界的幫助。研究者就此提出有關對策建議：

首先，應當通過公衆教育倡導一種客觀看待離婚的態度，“永遠的父母”之概念，以及，更爲平等和靈活的性別觀念。

此外，需要建立更完善的法律，更健全的政策，推動對離婚後家庭的服務。政府部門，學者，社區組織等應當爲此緊密合作。

最後，在策劃具體服務時，應當遵循一個整體的框架，在個人，家庭和社區各層面提供服務，以協助個體和家庭更快適應離婚後生活。

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to grow up happily and healthily without your efforts. Every-time I feel exhausted and distressed, feeling like to give up, your love and my responsibility for caring you in return stimulated me to carry on.

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Life is not a matter of holding good cards, but of playing a poor hand well.

--- Stevenson, Robert Louis¹

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy (1828-1910)² wrote that all happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Whether or not we agree with the first half of his statement, the second half seems true: each divorcing family appears uniquely marked with its own brand of loss and gain. It is also true for children of divorce, for the accumulating evidence that shows the impact of divorce on kids spans the entire continuum from “rosy” to “dark”.

To some extent, children whose parents divorce face the difficulties and challenges of one of the most perilous life conditions: the loss of one parent or other important relationships, inadequate parenting, being caught in the middle of post-divorce conflict, as well as unresolved tension, anger, loneliness. These are real, intense by-products of divorce and might remain viable for years. But divorce does not equate with doom for children. Many children have survived the breakup of their family. They have turned their pain into possibilities. They even become stronger, more mature than their peers who do not have such an experience.

¹ Stevenson, Robert Louis¹ (1850-1894), English author, whose classic novels include *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*.

² Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), Russian author, whose classic novels include *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

For children, divorce is often a beginning of unfinished business and uncertainty. Divorce adjustment is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process. As is true with the chapter-beginning note, “a poor hand” might win the trick in certain circumstances, such as the context that “protective factors” outweigh risk factors (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001; Emery & Forehand, 1994). What I know to be true, and what many researchers also agree with, is that children’s divorce adjustment is influenced by various factors, and children’s success in growing through their parents’ divorce is attainable with adequate support and resources.

This study, therefore, is to explore factors that facilitate children’s adjustment to divorce and make it possible for positive adaptation. The research topic is chosen with regard to the following three situations in China. First, the continuous increasing divorce rate in Mainland China indicates that a growing proportion of children are facing the difficult task of adjusting to parental divorce. Second, although a few studies in China have identified positive adjustment of children in post-divorce families, they are too scanty in number and limited in scope to provide a clear picture of the resilience process. Third, no study on the protective factors that facilitate the resilience process has been conducted in Mainland China so far. In the following paragraphs, the background information of divorce in China, and the issues related to research on children’s divorce adjustment is addressed to illustrate the significance of the topic.

Divorce in China

The increasing divorce rate

With enormous economic development following economic reform and the open door policy, Mainland China has witnessed an unprecedented high divorce rate since the 1980s (see Table 1-1).

Table 1-1 Registered marriages and divorces in contemporary China

Year	Marriages (10,000 couples)	Divorces (10,000 couples)	Divorce Rate (‰)
1985	831.3	45.8	0.9
1990	951.1	80.0	1.4
1991	953.6	82.9	1.4
1992	957.5	85.0	1.5
1993	915.4	90.9	1.5
1994	932.4	98.1	1.6
1995	934.1	105.5	1.8
1996	938.7	113.2	1.9
1997	914.1	119.8	1.9
1998	891.7	119.0	1.9
1999	885.3	120.2	1.9
2000	848.5	121.3	1.9
2001	805.0	125.0	2.0
2002	786.2	117.7	1.8
2003	811.4	133.1	2.1
2004	867.1	166.5	2.5

Source: China Statistical Yearbook 2005

The divorce rate³ sharply increased from 0.9 ‰ in 1985 to 2.5‰ in 2004. In 2004, the number of divorce decrees amounted to 1,665,000, as compared to 1,331,000 in 2003, an increase of 334,000 (25 %). This figure is also quadruple of that in 1985. Comparing the registered marriages and divorces in the same calendar year, we find

³ Divorce rate (‰)= the number of divorce/ population*1000 ‰

that the ratio of marriages and divorces in 1985 is approximately 15:1, while in 2004 it is significantly narrowed to 4:1.

Divorce in the Chinese socio-cultural context

Divorce is socially disapproved and rare in traditional China. Family harmony is accorded the central place in Confucian Chinese society. In Chinese, the word “nation” consists of two characters, “guo” (國) and “jia” (家). The former means country, and the latter means family (Kung, Hung & Chan, 2004). According to *Da Xue* (大學，經文一章)，a man must learn how to manage a family before administering a country (欲治其國者，先齊其家). Since much importance is attached to family harmony and marriage maintenance, divorce in traditional China was a highly taboo issue that was strictly regulated by the patriarchal family and social norms. Only the husband had right to dissolve the marriage; moreover, parents of the husband would have to agree to the divorce before it could be legitimized (易松國，陳麗雲及林召寰，2002). It was not until the downturn of the last imperial Chinese Kingdom – the Qing Dynasty - were women given the right of divorce. In the 1920s, the first “revolution of divorce” emerged with the anti-Confucian movement and the abolition of parent-arranged marriages (蘇全有及李麗霞，2004). Though women were given the right of divorce, usually it was the husband who initiated the divorce. The second revolution was in 1950s and was featured by the establishment of Marriage and Family Law (蘇全有及李麗霞，2004). Women were legally accorded the same right as men in deciding marriage or divorce.

Today's Chinese people hold a mixed-attitude towards divorce and family dissolution. On the one hand, people are becoming more and more tolerant about

divorce and divorced persons. In 2002, a cross-province study surveyed 2,719 young people aged 18-20 for their attitude towards marriage and divorce. Nearly 80 percent agreed that the personal right to divorce should be respected and protected (中國青年報, 2002). Another study in Beijing conducted in 2001 found that 98 percent out of the total 1,699 participants agreed with the right of a non-resident parent to contact children should be protected (黃秀麗, 2001). Divorce is the end of a marital relationship, as most participants thought, but not the simultaneous resolution of a parent-child relationship.

On the other hand, family harmony and integrity is still valued, while divorce is the last resort for an unhappy marriage. According to a study in Beijing in 2001, among the 400 participating spouses, only 1.8% would choose divorce if the partner had been addicted to drugs; and only 3.8% percent would decide for separation in the face of family violence (黃秀麗, 2001). It reflects the legacy of Confucian values on family harmony and marriage endurance as embodied in Chinese culture.

Children's adjustment to divorce in the Mainland, China

Although there is no accurate statistics of how many children experience parental divorce, we might speculate from the number of divorced couples that the number is large and increasing. It has attracted the attention of the public as well as academia. Most Mainland studies focus on the risks of divorce, with research findings about children's emotional disturbance (李翔及朱相華, 2002; 張志群及郭蘭婷, 2004) and/or behavioral problems (任飛, 2002; 何劍, 2000). Some studies proclaim that diminished parenting and/or troubled parent-child relationships are potential threats

for children's development (呂萌, 2002). Other risk factors caused by divorce and hiding children's normal functioning include being caught in the middle of conflict (徐安琪, 2001), feeling of loss, and being abandoned by a parent (姚本先及方雙虎, 2000).

These studies reflect the dominance of the pathological perspective. With the pathological perspective, the harmful effect of divorce is the major focus. In this perspective, children are perceived as the passive victims of divorce and the research is focused on the risks and failures in their lives. Overstating the risks of divorce adds stigma to children from divorced families, as they frequently are thought of as “losers” or “people awaiting help”.

Findings of some recent studies have added a positive note to this gloomy picture of children of divorce. Han (韓曉燕, 2004) also remarked that children can actively elicit support from others and make use of the external resources available. Children in Xu & Ye's (徐安琪及葉文振, 2001) study reported a lot of growth years after parental divorce: they had learned to be a responsible person, a hard worker, and skilled at self-management. However, these studies have not take a step forward to examine the facilitating factors that contribute to these positive adjustments. Hence, a study focused on protective factors was conducted to bridge the knowledge gap in resilience research in China. The study tried to answer two research questions.

Research questions

1. What are the perceived protective factors in children's adjustment to parental divorce in a Chinese context?

2. How do these identified protective factors contribute to a child's positive adjustment to parental divorce in a Chinese context?

Organization of the thesis

A review on studies of children's divorce adjustment in both China and Western societies is made in Chapter two. Resilience perspective is brought forward. Important concepts such as resilience and protective factors are discussed. Chapter three presents the theoretical framework of this study. Chapter four describes the research methodology and details of fieldwork. Chapter five presents the background of the informants. Chapter six is the analysis of protective factors in children's adjustment to divorce. Chapter seven reviews the results and contributes to an integrative discussion on research findings, followed by recommendations at practice and policy level in the chapter eight.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on children's divorce adjustment in China

Maladjustment as the focus of research in the Mainland

There are no accurate statistics about children from divorced families, yet we may speculate from such a high divorce rate that the amount must be quite large. Numerous empirical studies assert that divorce increases the risk for the development of problems in children. In comparison with those in two-parent households, they are more likely to have behavioral, internal, social, and academic problems. The most evidenced aversive effects are seen with externalizing behavior and internalizing symptoms. Academic problems are also present, although the differences between divorced and never divorced populations are small and less consistent.

Externalizing behavioral problems

Most research on externalizing behaviors of children from a divorce background focus on delinquent behaviors. He (何劍, 2000) surveyed 150 male delinquent youth aged 14-18. In this sample, 51.3% were from “broken families”, or rather, single-parent families. Ren (任飛, 2002) claimed with an unnamed data source that 81% percent of delinquent youth are from single-parent families. Liu and his colleagues (Liu, Guo, Li, Masako, Zhai, Jenae, Hiroshi, 2000) compared children from divorced families and children from two-parent families in terms of externalizing problems. Parental reports on Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) were

administered to examine differences between 58 children of divorce and 116 matched controls. Results indicated that after controlling for family income, the prevalence of parental reporting of externalizing behavior problems was significantly higher in children of divorce.

Internalizing behavioral problems

Internalizing behaviors refers to psychological states of well being such as depression, self-esteem, suicidal ideation, etc. Li & Zhu (李翔, 及朱相華, 2002) studied 334 students, including 40 students from post-divorce families, and found a significant difference between children from single-parent households and their two-parent counterparts. Children from divorced families showed a less satisfactory psychological well being in terms of depression, anxiety, paranoia, and sensitiveness. Qi, Wang & Ollendick (2001) utilized the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI), the Revised Children's Manifested Anxiety Scales (RCMAS) (Reynold & Rickmond, 1978, 1985), and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck & Steer, 1993) to examine differences in internalizing problems between 174 children (83 boys and 91 girls) from divorced families and 174 peers from two-parent families. Children who experienced parental divorce self-reported significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety. Similarly, Zhang & Guo (張志群及郭蘭婷, 2004) examined 198 children from single-parent households and found that they had a higher depression level compared with 1,393 children from two-parent households.

Two studies found even more striking results on mental health of children from post-divorce families. He & Shao (何林及邵裕民, 2001) proclaimed that among the 88 participating children of divorce, 23.86 % were assessed as depressed and another 27.27 % were assessed as self-contemptuous. Overall, nearly 80 % of children from single-parent households manifested at least one negative symptom in mental health. Another study with 49 children from divorced families reported that 98 % of them were identified as having symptoms of depression and anxiety, in contrast to 14.3 % in the comparison group (劉建勳, 黃建軍及毛富強, 2003). As there was no concrete explanation on the operationalization of these psychological symptoms, nor standard measurement used, validity and reliability of the above results could not be verified.

Lower level of academic performance

Yang, Lu, Zhang & Hou (楊靜, 盧智泉, 張國毅及侯長餘, 1999) examined the difference of academic performance of 287 students from single-parent families in a total number of 2,432 students comprised of 615 from junior-school, 846 from senior-school, and 971 from university. Their average score of two major subjects (subjects are not standardized) in the preceding term was six points lower than children from two-parent families. The difference was statistically significant and was significantly related to broken family status. Lei (雷玉潔, 2001) calculated the average score of four to six years of primary study and found that among 71 children from divorced families, 19 scored below 60 marks (the full mark is 100) while only two from two-parent families failed most of the tests.

Contradictory findings in recent Mainland studies

From the above reviewed literature we may conclude that divorce is a risk inducing life transition that puts children in a disadvantaged position, which explains why children with a divorce background are over-represented in delinquent youth and showed a less satisfactory level in psychological well-being and academic performance. However, Xu (徐安琪, 2001) criticized these divorce studies for their over-simplistic assumption on the linear cause-effect of divorce and children outcome and the over-focus on maladjustment of children. Much of the Mainland research was based on a deficit model of divorce guided by two assumptions. First, it was assumed that a two-parent family structure is necessary for successful child development; second, it was assumed that divorce was a traumatic event that had severe and enduring deleterious effects on children's adjustment.

There are, though limited, studies that challenge the supposed deficit model of divorce in examining the impact of divorce on children and suggest that children are not necessarily passive victims of parental divorce. A study on the academic performance of children from divorced families reported interesting results: children of divorce either performed unusually well or unusually awful in study (劉建勳, 黃建軍及毛富強, 2003).

In a study conducted by Liu and his colleagues, teachers were asked to rate the academic performance of 58 children of divorce and 116 matched controls with a 3-point scale (good/fair/poor). The results indicated that despite the statistically insignificant difference in points, children from divorced families were approximately

regarded as capable as children from two-parent families. Similarly, Xu and Ye (徐安琪及葉文振, 2001) sampled 500 children aged 6-15 and found that 32.4 % class teachers found “no difference” between children from divorced families and children from intact families. Furthermore, 12.4 % of the teachers reported that children from divorced families are even better while another 26.8 % of them reported that, “they excel in some aspects despite inadequacies in other aspects.”

Positive results can also be found in other aspects of children, such as having good qualities like “capable of self-management”, “caring parents”, and “not wasting money” (徐安琪及葉文振, 2001). Similarly, Han (韓曉燕, 2004) found that children showed high capabilities in coping by utilizing resources available to meet their needs.

These studies, though limited in number, suggest that divorced family children may fare better than or at least as well as children from non-divorced families. They highlight the growth and maturity of these children, in sharp contrast to those studies in which children from divorced families exhibit an array of social, psychological, and academic problems. How could we understand the diversity as suggested by various studies?

As divorce research has been carried out in Western society for a long time with fruitful findings, it is natural for us to turn to divorce studies in the Western context and see whether or not the diversity is also identified and in what ways Western researchers make sense of it. Therefore, we may get some insight that serves a more comprehensive understanding on children’s adjustment to divorce.

Research on children's divorce adjustment in the West

Diversified outcomes of children's divorce adjustment in Western Studies

Similar to research in the Mainland, diversified outcomes were reported in Western studies. On the one hand, some investigators have repeatedly documented that, compared to children coming from married parents, children of divorced parents are less successful academically (Astone & McLanahan, 1991); they have lower levels of psychological accord (Kurdek, Fine, & Sinclair, 1994); they are less efficient in social skills (Beaty, 1995); and they more prone to drug abuse and criminal behavior (McLanahan & Booth, 1989).

On the other hand, some studies found that children of divorce on average are not distinguishably different from children of intact families (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001); some live as well as and even better than children whose parents were married (Amato, 1999; Pike, 2003; Voza, 1984). With comprehensive meta-analysis on divorce studies of children's adjustment, Amato & Keith (1991) identified a small effect size of difference between children of divorce and non-divorce backgrounds and concluded that though parental divorce (or factors associated with it) appears to lower the well-being of children, the estimated effects are relatively weak. An update analysis again reported a moderate effect size and asserted that the average difference between children with divorced and continuously married parents is not large in absolute terms (Amato, 2000). Another investigation on effect sizes of studies in the UK and USA in the 1990s indicated that approximately 75 to 80 percent children were slightly affected by parental divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Besides, Hetherington &

Kelly (2002) found that 50 percent in divorced and remarried families were adolescents scoring around the average on internalizing, externalizing, social, and cognitive competence, while 30 percent were unusually competent, having high skills in dealing with demanding or stressful situations.

In all, as Amato (2000) argued, children of divorce are in a heterogeneous group; some may function as well as those children from married families and some may function even better, while the rest have difficulties. The diversity of outcomes is reflected not only within the group, but also across the different dimensions of children adjustment.

The largest and most consistent effects of divorce on children's adjustment are found in the domain of externalizing behavior. Children from divorce backgrounds are over-represented in juvenile delinquency and behavioral problems such as casual sex and substance abuse (Kessler, Davis & Kendler, 1997, Pryor & Rodgers, 2002, Sweeting, West & Richards, 1998). Pike (2003), however, argued that children's adjustment should be assessed by everyday skills. The Everyday Household Responsibilities and Life Skills Inventory (EHRLSI) (Amato & Ochiltree, 1986, cited in Pike, 2003) was administered to 272 children, 136 from single-parent families and 136 from two-parent families. No significant difference was found. Pike (2003) thus concluded that children of divorce are as competent as their peers in daily behavior repertoire.

Children in divorced families also are vulnerable to internalizing problems. Possible impairment in self-concept has been examined fairly frequently, but

differences are typically small in magnitude and are often not statistically significant (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). Again in Pike's (2003) study, no significant difference was identified in global self-worth between the 136 children from single-parent families and their matched peers. Children who experienced parental divorce were not at risk in terms of their actual competence and desired competence (Pike, 2003). In a study of the long-term consequences of parental divorce for children, Amato (1999) measured young adults' subjective well-being in terms of a single-item indicator of self-reported happiness and a summary measure of satisfaction with multiple areas, such as job, home, neighborhood, and leisure activities. The results indicated that 42% of children with divorced parents reached adulthood with a level of personal well-being higher than that of the average child from a two-parent household.

Turning to academic performance, studies that have used standardized measures (i.e., general achievement or intelligence tests or tests specific to skill subjects such as reading and mathematics) tended to report no significant differences in the academic performance of the children, or, indeed, that in some cases single-parent children outperformed their two parent peers (Voza, 1984). Another reviewer reported similar findings (Blechman, 1982) while raising serious doubts about the validity of studies that have claimed an association between poor academic performance and living in single-parent households.

In sum, considerable variation in children's divorce adjustment is found in Western studies: faced with divorce and related stresses, some children are disturbed and

develop problem behaviors. Yet many live through these difficulties and manage a life in routine. Various findings allow for various streams of understanding in divorce studies. Different researchers held different perspectives of divorce and its impact. The diversity in children's divorce adjustment thus has ushered in an enduringly heated debate of "all harm" or "no harm" in parental divorce for children.

Resilience perspective in children's divorce adjustment

The "all harm" and "no harm" argument

Encountering the diversified and inconsistent outcomes of children's adjustment to parental divorce, there are two extremes of the argument that divorce is "all harm" or "no harm" for children (Cherlin, 1999). With the "all harm" extreme or the pathological perspective, the inadequacy and difficulties in single parent households and child development is the nub of the discussion. It is assumed that divorce harms most of the children who experience it, seriously and permanently (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). With a pathological model of divorce, there is an assumed linear cause-result relationship between parental divorce and child maladjustment (Hetherington, 2003). Wallerstein (1983) frequently used words "cruel" and "sad" in her work to describe divorce and its impact. Based on her clinical practice with children of divorce, she argued living through divorce is full of pain, stress, and conflict. The pathological perspective does well with its focus on risks and stresses of divorce to call for public attention and intervention; nevertheless, it

obscures the positive adjustment in children of divorce and thus may bring additional stigma to them.

Another extreme of “no harm” perspective, in contrast, asserts that what parents do makes little difference in children’s adjustment. It follows that few children are harmed by parental divorce or by living in a single parent household (Harris, 1998). Even when there are some problems observed, the children’s maladjustment is thought to be the consequence of antecedent events before the divorce occurs (Hetherington, 2003), such as pre-divorce inter-parental conflict. The “no harm” perspective is valuable as it reflects competence in children from divorced families and resources available, yet the skewed discussion on the strength and resource overlooked the difficulties of children from divorced families, as well as their needs for support in the adjustment process.

Resilience perspective: a both-and perspective

Both the “all harm” and “no harm” positions hold some truth, but they are over-simplistic. Just as Pryor & Rodgers (2001) commented:

“Undoubtedly, parental separation constitutes a risk for children, but the evidence suggests that it is not the major risk factor. Children are not necessarily harmed by family transitions, but neither are transitions benign, risk-free events” (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001:73).

A third perspective, therefore, is proposed as a potential complement to the existing dichotomy. According to Atwood (1995) and Cherlin (1999), it should be a both-and

perspective, encompassing stressors and development difficulties as well as positive adjustment. It is the resilience perspective. The resilience perspective acknowledged the difficulties children might encounter in post-divorce life, yet unlike pathological perspective, it held that positive adjustment is an achievable result. The resilience perspective highlighted the strengths and resources in children's divorce adjustment, yet it did not ignore the difficulties and unmet needs of these children. In brief, resilience perspective differs from the other two perspectives discussed above in which it put equal weight on the both aspect, that is, challenges and opportunities, risks and resources.

Discussions on resilience originated in the field of developmental psychology in the early 1970s (Luthar, 1999). Studies on children of schizophrenic mothers, who thrived despite of their high-risk status, played a crucial role in the emergence of childhood resilience as a major theoretical and empirical topic (Garmezy, 1974). Following Emmy Werner's groundbreaking studies on children in Hawaii (Werner, Bierman, & French, 1971), research on children resilience expanded to multiple adverse conditions such as socioeconomic disadvantages and its associated risks (Garmezy, 1991; Werner & Smith, 1982, 1992), parental mental illness (Masten & Coatsworth, 1995, 1998), maltreatment (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1997; Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch & Holt, 1993), divorce (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Hetherington & Elmore, 2003; Rodgers & Rose, 2002), and so forth.

The recognition of positive adjustment in children at risk has overturned many deficit-focused models with the assumption that living with adversity would

necessarily deteriorate children's normal functioning. With the resilience perspective, bouncing back with satisfactory performance is the normative outcome for the majority of children whose parents divorce. Children may temporarily be struck down and divorce does increase the liability for developmental difficulties. Yet most of them manage to overcome the odds despite some distressful or painful memories (Amato, 1991, 2001; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Emery & Mitchell, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003). For a better grasp of this perspective, the following section is taken as a theoretical discussion on key concepts in this perspective.

Resilience as a process

The word "resilience" is adopted widely in literatures that explains benign outcomes of the children's development under the threat of genetic or experiential adversity, yet the definition of "resilience" is not without controversy. Some researchers use resilience to describe the ability to draw on personal or social resources, to detect contingencies and predictability in complex situations, and the ability to react flexibly (Rauh, 1989). The use of "resilience" as the connotation of a *personality attribute* can inadvertently pave the way for the speculation that those who are in need of help should be blamed for a lack of skills or being low in capabilities that are owned by others. The perceptions that some individuals simply do not "have what it takes" to overcome adversity may cause public discrimination towards those who are temporarily stuck in the process of adjustment (Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker, 2000).

Tarter & Vanyukov (1999) described resilience as *manifested satisfactory outcome* at time N in one person after having adversity that resulted in putatively high liability at Time 1 (Tarter & Vanyukov, 1999). Masten (2001: 228) defines resilience as “a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development”. Such conceptualization obscures the dynamic process in which personal and environmental assets protect an individual from developing psychological or behavioral problems because of the accumulating distresses in life. Without an understanding of the process leading to positive adjustment, the resilient outcome seems to be a mystery or luck going by destiny. Simply differentiating those who could be regarded as bouncing back from adversities had little theoretical practical implications. Furthermore, the construct of “resilience” outcome depends on socio-cultural context (Johnson, 1999). For example, a shy girl might be looked upon as “resilient” in a neighborhood that promotes deviant acts since she is unlikely to engage in peer delinquency in her neighborhood. In another way, this shy girl may be regarded as “maladjusted” if she goes to a school brimming with opportunities to engage in pro-social activities. Therefore, thinking about resilience in dualistic terms, i.e., one is either resilient or non-resilient, might be too simplistic.

Masten (1994) recommended that the term resilience be used exclusively when referring to the *process* of achieving and maintaining positive adjustment under challenging life conditions. A transactional process model is valued in elaborating how the interaction of risk and protective factors determines the path and pace of the resilience process. Risk factors disrupt the initial status quo, while protective factors

and resources modify the effect of risk factors and help the individual to bounce back from temporary chaos and breakdown (Kumpfer, 1999). With protective factors surpassing risk factors, resilient outcome is more likely to be achieved. This process is also influenced by subjective experience, which determines how individuals evaluate risks as well as how they actively interpret and make use of protective factors to deal with these risks. For a thorough understanding of the resilience process, further discussion on risk factors, protective factors, resilience outcome, and subjective experience in the transactional process model is made as follows.

Risk factors

Risk factors refer to any influence that increases the probability of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes (Amato, 1999; Clayton, 1992). Traditionally, risk was conceived as a marker, a stressor, or a factor predicting undesirable outcomes such as poverty, marital conflict, child abuse, etc. Later researchers argued that risk factors are a sequence of stress experiences and often pile up over time in the lives of children (Garmezy & Masten, 1994). Risk factors occur together (Garmezy, 1993a; Rutter, 2001), or, certain stress predisposes other stresses that actually increase the possibility of behavioral and emotional problems (Cowan, Pape, & Schulz, 1996).

Despite such a pile of risk factors, risk is always probabilistic in nature, meaning that children exposed to risk factors are more likely to (but not necessarily) experience negative outcomes (Hetherington & Mitchell, 2003). The consistent variability in outcomes among children exposed to divorce, as well as other life adversities, implies

that there must be other factors (i.e., protective factors) that come into play in the adjustment process.

Protective factor

Early studies describe protective factors as simply the opposite side of risk factors. Notwithstanding, some experts observed that this approach blurred the distinction between risk and protection (Fraser, et al., 2004). As Rutter (2000, p.58) argued, “there is not much to be gained, apart from the introduction of unhelpful confusion, calling the low end of a risk dimension as a protective factor.” In response, researchers have defined separate, conceptually distinct protective constructs. In the writings of Michael Rutter (1987) and Norman Garmezy and his colleagues (Garmezy, Masten & Tellgan, 1984), the term “protective” was reserved for factors that work to reduce imposed life difficulties. It could be the external resources directly eliminate the risk factor. For instance, closeness with at least one parent is proved to be effective in diminishing the negative effects of post-divorce parental conflict (Emery & Forehand, 1994). Or it may be the individual’s ability in coping with the divorce-related stresses (Rutter, 1987). That can be illustrated by Amato’s (2001) study in which children who have an easy temperament are more likely to elicit positive responses in their coping process. Despite the difference in ways of reducing risk factors, all these factors contribute to reducing the risk level, and eases individual’s adjustment with the prediction of a satisfactory outcome (Masten, 2001).

Extant empirical studies have identified that protective factors exist at different levels. In brief, they include individual attributes, family qualities, and supportive systems outside of family (Garmezy, 1985; Werner, 1989). By including individual attributes, environmental factors, and outcome into its framework, this model gives us a more holistic understanding of a person's adjustment to life adversity.

Resilient outcome

Resilient outcome is a construct that requires two basic judgments. The first judgment addresses the risks: there must be demonstrable risks. The second judgment involved in an inference about resilient outcome is the criteria by which the adaptation or developmental outcome is assessed or evaluated as “good” or “OK”.

Controversy remains, however, about what can be defined as “good” or “O.K.” This is a highly complex issue that is only starting to be addressed empirically. Some investigators have limited their focus on specific academic or social achievements that children made despite risks or adversities (Luthar & Zelazo, 2003). Though those children with an excellent functioning level might lend strong support to the claim that there are positive and optimistic outcomes, it obscures many children who maintain an average functioning level while living in hardship. This stringent criterion for doing “good” may even cause inappropriate blame towards those who are not “excellent”, but in fact have adjusted as well as peers in low risk.

Other investigators, in contrast, include children with an average functioning level without apparent negative outcome (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Kelly & Emery, 2003).

In divorce research, children who are regarded as “resilient” are those who do not suffer from psychological problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003), do not have substantial mental health problems (Emery & Forehand, 1994), do not drop out of high school or experience school failures (Emery, 1999), or do not exhibit severe or enduring behavior problems (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In all, children from divorced families performed as well as their peers – it actually could be regarded as proof of their resilient quality, given the difficulties and challenges caused by parental divorce.

Subjective experience and the emerging qualitative approach in resilience research

Resilience is a personal negotiation through the complexities of the risk and protective factors available to individuals (Kaplan, 1999). Perceiving people as having active agency rather than the passive victims of life crisis, Kumpfer (1999) highlighted the importance of people’s subjective experience in the resilience process in their theoretical proclamation. Her model aptly illustrated how individuals actively participated in the resilience process. A person in this process actively makes sense of threats and challenges that prohibit his/her adjustment, as well as resources and strengths that help construct a protective environment. A coping history influences the manner in which environmental cues and stimuli are interpreted and organized. New experiences, attitudes, and expectations are derived from the current experiences and shape the way later experiences are to be organized. In other words, it is the

transaction between the individual and their environmental sources that creates an atmosphere for the occurrence of protective factors.

Unparallel with the theoretical proclamation of the importance of an individual's active agency in the resilience perspective, most studies conducted so far use the quantitative approach (Masten, 2001). Variable-focused approaches use multivariate statistics to test the connection of variables of the degree of risk, outcome, and good qualities of the individual or the environment, so as to identify variables that function to protect children from adversities. Some even examined when the effects of identified protective factors are additive, mediating, or moderating. Person-focused approaches identify people who met the criteria for resilience. These people's lives and attributes were then studied by investigators. Statistics were used when resilient individuals were compared with maladaptive ones, who had similar levels of risk but who displayed markedly different outcomes.

While these two quantitative approaches are useful in identifying certain variables that contribute to an individual's positive adjustment, they are criticized for simplifying the process of protective factors functioning in real life and overlooking a subject's active agency (Ungar, 2003). A third approach – the qualitative approach - recently caught the notice of a small number of researchers. Ungar (2003) claimed that only qualitative methods, "could be rigorously employed in the study of resilience to deepen our studying of the phenomenon". There are only a handful of studies that focus on exploring protective factors based on children's subjective experience. The

identified inadequacy has called for more utilization of the qualitative approach in resilience studies.

Protective factors in children's divorce adjustment

Western researchers have contributed many empirical findings of protective factors. Most are quantitative studies in which factors correlating to children's better competence are identified as protective factors.

For individual factors, children who are intelligent and have an easy temperament, high self-esteem, an internal sense of control, and a good sense of humor are better able to adapt to the stresses and challenges associated with divorce (Amato 2001, Hetherington, 1991, Werner, 1993).

For family factors, the psychological adjustment of the custodial parent (usually mothers) that provide emotional support and adequate monitoring (Hetherington 1999a, 1999b), frequent visits by the non-custodial parent in the context of low conflict (Amato & Rezac 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002), diminished parental conflict after divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato & Rezac, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly 2002), and support from grandparents (Hetherington & Mitchell. 2003) contribute to children's better adjustment.

For extra-familial factors, researchers have suggested that peer relationships moderate the effects of stressful transitions on children in divorced families (Hetherington, 1989). Peer support buffered the effects of low parental support in divorced single-parent families (Hetherington & Mitchell, 2003; Rodgers & Rose

2002). Besides this, positive school experience is a buffer against a stressful home context (Werner, 1992). Since school is the major living environment for school-aged children, school-based support and programs have been found to be valuable resources to children from divorcing or post-divorce families (Pryor & Richards, 2004). Group intervention is another community support found to be effective in assisting children to deal in coping with immediate and long stressors accompanying divorce (Laumann, 2002) and improving children's well-being and adjustment for the long term (Rubin, 1990). Having a non-parental adult whom one can count on, like a firm and warm teacher (Hetherington, 1989) or another caring adult is another major protective factor (Masten & Coatsworth 1998; Werner & Smith, 1992).

Notwithstanding, the importance of subjective experience is acknowledged theoretically, and researchers rarely adopt qualitative methods to explore children's subjective experience of divorce. There are only a handful of studies that directly investigate children's subjective understanding and perception of divorce experience based on the resilience perspective (Flowerdew and Neale, 2003; Harvey & Fine, 2004; Hogan, Marie and Greene, 2003; Moxnes, 2003). Consistent with the quantitative results, a parent is an important source of emotional support, information, and advice. Children usually establish or improve their relationship with at least one parent after divorce (Butler et al., 2003). Relatives were another valued source of support and protection. Grandparents, in particular, were considered as a trusted source of attention and reassurance. A grandparent's home provided a place where children felt "at home" without some of the stresses they felt in their parental homes

(Butler et al., 2003). Besides support from family life, many children regard their relationships with friends as significantly supportive. Children turn to friends to talk to in order to secure reassurance or advice, or simply to have someone listen to them, and to spend time together as a means of taking their minds off what was happening in their family (Butler et al., 2003). Children found comfort especially in talking to a friend who also had experienced parental divorce, and therefore there was strong empathy and sympathy between them (Drapeau et al., 1999).

In addition to the identified importance of familial support and peer support, which is consistent with the quantitative results, the unique findings of the qualitative exploratory studies are children's need for a reasonable understanding of parental divorce and some physical and psychological space to grieve for the loss. When children were provided some information on why the divorced took place, or even had an opportunity to openly discuss with parents about what and why it happened, they seemed to have an easier time in later adjustment (Harvey & Fine, 2004). In contrast, children who were not informed when the decision on divorce had been made felt that their parents showed little concern to their feelings (Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999).

Effective coping of stress or emotions were also proved to be a significant protection for some children (Butler et al., 2003). Many reported that crying alone helped them a lot. Some children preferred activities such as sports or play as a means of venting their feelings and emotions safely. Others found that quiet reflection,

thinking through, and writing down what was happening was very useful, which helped them stand in an objective position in reframing their experience.

Children's experiences in diverse socio-cultural context

As we have learnt from the literature reviewed above, there are similarities as well as differences in children's divorce adjustment in diverse cultural context. Both Chinese and Western studies examined the outcome of adjustment in terms of academic performance, external behavior and psychological well-being. While more Chinese studies focused on the maladjustment, more children with divorce background in the West were found to have comparable development with or had even outgrown their counterparts from intact families. A pathological perspective has long influenced studies on children's post-divorce adjustment in Chinese context. In contrast, more research in the West context adopted a resilience perspective on children's positive adjustment to divorce despite stresses and risks.

Regarding the process of children's divorce adjustment, Chinese and Western studies reported similar risk factors or divorce-related stresses, such as the economical pressure, loss of parent, post-divorce parental conflict, etc. Yet we knew little about factors that protects children to overcome the odds in the Chinese context. It was in sharp contrast with Western studies which have identified a lot of protective factors in individual, family and extra-family level.

Summary

Research in both the Chinese and Western context reported the diversity in the outcome of children's divorce adjustment. A number of children with a divorced background had comparable development with or had even outgrown their counterparts from intact families. Conceptualizing resilience as the dynamic process of interaction between risk and protective factors provides the most inclusive perspective on children's positive adjustment to divorce despite stresses and risks. Thus, a resilience perspective was adopted as the conceptual framework of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Resilience perspective as the guiding perspective

As the most inclusive perspective among the various constructs of resilience, “resilience” is conceptualized as a dynamic process in this study. It is a process from disequilibrium to a new equilibrium, and, at the same time, a transactional process between risk and protective factors. Risk factors set obstacles in one’s developmental pathway and increase one’s liability to problem behaviors. Protective factors are those internal or external resources that promote one’s positive adjustment through either reducing the risk level directly or enhancing one’s coping ability. When risk factors are too overwhelming, children may be temporarily handicapped in this process and develop problem behaviors. Yet given adequate protective factors, most children manage to overcome the odds and grow from such experiences. It is the process wherein children would fight with, and learn from, difficulties in life.

Children’s divorce adjustment as conceptualized by resilience perspective

Children’s divorce adjustment as a resilience process

The onset of divorce disrupts the status quo in a child’s life and predisposes them to risk factors such as economic decline, loss of contact with one parent, diminished parenting quality, and being caught in the middle of continuing conflict. Despite these risks growing in the post-divorce period, most children are fortunate enough to have protective factors that counteract the effects of these risks. The process of resilience

could not be a smooth one; the balance between risks and protection levels may sway from time to time. Temporal disturbance is possible if the stress level is too high. While a child may fail to acquire adequate resources to assist him/her to deal with stress, the child is able to regain control on life when he/she possesses abundant protective factors. Such understanding reminds us that a child who currently has adjustment difficulties should not be evaluated as “non-resilient” or “incompetent”; it is just because he/she got stuck in the process due to a lack of personal or environmental resources.

Given time and resources, the majority of children can go through the resilience process and pass through the test of adversities. Resilient children return to the new equilibrium with growth and learning; they function as well as children from intact families and may even prevail over some peers in certain aspects as they learn from their coping history. Painful memories or sorrowful feelings may be a lasting residue for youngsters who experienced parental divorce in childhood. Yet these distresses cannot be mistaken for disorder; on the contrary, it further testifies to children’s resiliency, as they manage to remain calm in spite of the pain that stings them from time to time.

Protective factors in the resilience process of adjustment

Protective factors in the resilience process facilitate children’s recovery via reducing the risk level. Protective factors may take the form of external resources or internal cognitive and behavior strength in dealing with risks.

As reviewed above, protective factors exist at different levels: individual attributes, such as intellectual skills and a positive temperament; family qualities, such as high warmth and cohesion; and supportive systems outside the family, such as strong social networks. Findings in the Western context could be a reference point for this pioneer study in Chinese societies.

Children's subjective experience

With resilience perspective, children of divorce are regarded as active participants instead of passive victims in post-divorce life. Children have their own understanding of family after parental divorce and act out in accordance to such perception (Smart et al., 2003). In response to the varying degree of challenges in their lives, children not only make their own appraisal of stresses and resources available, but also adopt a wide range of coping mechanisms and supporting strategies and creatively draw on the resources around them for help (Butler et al., 2003).

Relevant issues

Socio-cultural context

Ungar (2004) reminded that researchers should be culture-sensitive in conducting resilience research across different societies. A particular social environment would no doubt have impact on the occurrence and effect of risk and protective factors, and further determine the path and pace of the resilience process. The positive adjustment

is a product of interactions between the socio-cultural circumstances and the individual who is embedded in it.

As Mainland China has a unique socio-cultural context, we might speculate that Chinese children would go through a distinctive pathway of the resilience process in their adjustment to parental divorce. For instance, how would the changing perception of marriage and divorce (as discussed in chapter one) influence children's understanding of parental divorce? Or, how would extended family members respond to the child's suffering, as the Chinese are used to having a stronger communal support network among kin? These are two examples that probably illustrate the impact of socio-cultural context on a child's divorce adjustment. There are other possibilities for the way certain socio-cultural factor shapes a child's resilience experience, as we shall learn from the interview data in a later stage of this study.

Children's developmental stage

A child's age is thought to affect their adjustment. Age is thought to affect the problems the children experiences during divorce. Research findings demonstrate that while small children encounter more problems immediately after divorce, older children (pre-adolescents or adolescents) met these types of problems in later stages of their lives (Sirvanli-Ozen, 2005). This might be explained by the fact that older children lived with family rules and regulations for a longer period of time and thus had difficulty in learning the new rules put into effect after divorce while small children manage this more easily (Brown, Portes, & Christensen, 1989). Another

reason could be that the transition from childhood to adolescence involves dramatic changes and numerous demands (McNamara, 2002). This, together with the life difficulties caused by divorce, imposed more “stumbling blocks” on an adolescent’s pathway to growth.

Researchers have also found that age related to differences in children’s coping capabilities and resources. Adolescents are more advantaged than small children as their repertoire of knowledge and skills of responding to risks and stresses expands as they grow up. Compared to small children, adolescents are more involved and intimate with peers and friends, turning to them for support formerly provided by the family (Seiffge-Kenke, 1995). Conversely, while small children who have restricted cognitive ability might have problems in comprehending the conflict between their parents and in developing the right strategies to cope with this, older adolescents are capable of selecting social support strictly in accordance to the problem at hand and thus ensure maximum effective coping (Seiffge-Kenke, 1995).

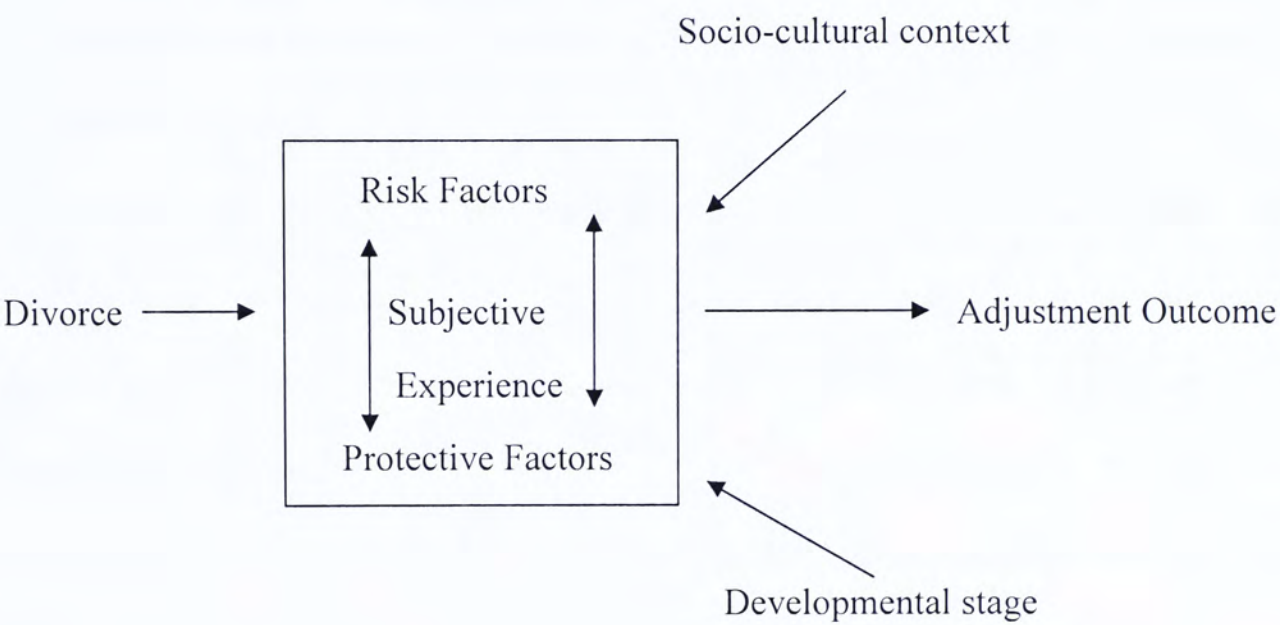
Hence, developmental stage is related to both risk and protective factors in children’s divorce adjustment. Generally speaking, adolescents face more challenges while at the same time acquire more resources.

Summary

Children’s divorce adjustment could be understood as a resilience process that is initiated by the onset of parental divorce and ends with positive adjustment. Protective

factors neutralize risk factors and facilitate children’s positive adjustment. Children actively participate in this process with their cognitive and behavior strength. The resilience process is also developmentally and contextually influenced. The process is illustrated in Figure 3-1:

Figure 3-1 Children’s divorce adjustment as resilience process



CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative approach

There are two approaches in conducting social science inquiries - qualitative and quantitative research. Despite a history and continuation of debates over what is an appropriate research method for social work, Royse (2004) points out that there are strengths and limitations in both approaches and they can complement each other. The decision to choose qualitative, quantitative, or a mixed design depends on the research question and research purpose.

For this study, the qualitative approach with in-depth interviews was adopted for the following two reasons. First, the qualitative approach with in-depth interviews ensures that the researcher can view events, norms, and values from the perspective of informants (Bryman, 2001). For followers of the qualitative approach, humans with purposes and emotions actively make plans, hold values, and construct their life experiences. Therefore, human beings can and must be understood in a manner different from other objects of study. With a qualitative approach, the researcher has in a better stance of seeing through the informants' eyes. In this study, the exploration process was guided by the "zero-distance" encounter of the children and the researcher, which facilitated my understanding of their subjective perceptions of protective factors.

Second, the qualitative approach excels in providing thick descriptions of research objects (Gilgun, 1999). A qualitative inquiry helped vividly describe the resilience process by explicating what helped and how they helped in children's resilience process of divorce adjustment. With genuine curiosity for these adolescents' experiences, I invited them to freely talk about what happened in their lives after

parental divorce so that I was able to give detailed accounts of how children perceived and lived through post-divorce.

Sample

Sample design

Criterion sampling (陳向明, 2000:108) is adopted as the sampling strategy. By criterion sampling, the researcher set some criterion beforehand and only those cases that met the predetermined criterion would be sampled and studied (Patton, 1990). The researcher samples incidents, slices of life, time periods, or people on the basis of their manifestation or representation of theoretical constructs or common knowledge. In this study, I set the following criterion for sampling:

1. According to the definition of resilient outcome discussed above, children with a divorce background and showing average performance or above average performance in the academic, behavioral and psychological aspect are the appropriate target for this study.
2. Children in their adolescence were recruited. According to the discussion above, compared to children (younger than 12), an adolescent's⁴ (aged 12 to 18) adjustment process involved more protective and risk factors from a wider range of sources. Hence, a study with adolescents as research subjects could yield a

⁴ The definition of adolescence varies by culture. In the United States adolescence is generally considered as 12 to 18 years old (Wikipedia Encyclopedia, 2005). Notwithstanding, the age range for "adolescence" varies for different researchers (Fan & Wang, 2001; Wang & Xu, 2001; Wo & Lin, 2000). In this study, "adolescence" refers to children aged 12 to 18.

richer understanding of what the protective factors are and how they work. In addition, in-depth interviews demand great capability in narrating, reflecting, and expressing their life experience; adolescents are capable of this.

3. Divorce adjustment is not a one-time incident but an on-going process. Previous studies have found that it takes one or two years after divorce for children to recover from the shock and to return or develop a new routine of life (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002). To ensure that participants have gone through a comparatively long process with a resilient outcome, only children whose parents had been divorced for at least two years were recruited. The upper limit of length of time for parental divorce was ten years, otherwise the parental divorce was likely to happen in the participants' early childhood and thus the children were too young to clearly remember or understand what had happened.
4. Children of both genders were recruited.
5. Children with different custody arrangement or caretakers; i.e., living with father, mother, grandparent, or other relatives were recruited.
6. Considering the differences between living in single-parent households after divorce and remarried households (Hetherington & Mitchell, 2003), in order not to complicate the study, children who lived in remarried households were excluded.

Procedures of sampling

Seven informants were recruited for this study. One way of recruiting is through the help of teachers in school, since teachers had the best knowledge about the student's individual information and family background. Considering this study was about adolescents, I visited a vocational school and a high school, as the age range of adolescents studying there was from 16 to 18. During an informal interview with teachers, I explained to them the detailed criterion of sampling and asked them to provide information about the potential informants' age, gender, years of parental divorce, performance in school, etc. Only those who were appraised as "without problem" in the school work and relationship with peers were further interviewed. I also invited the interviewee to evaluate his/her performance by asking them "How do you think of the influence of divorce on you" and "Give an index from one to ten points, how do you appraise your performance among the peers" and other similar questions. Lastly, I made my own observation during the interview about informants' emotional state and psychological well-being. Through this means, I recruited and interviewed seven informants in the first round of interview. One informant was excluded after the first interview, for she was from a remarried family. Another informant could not be reached after the first interview, leaving five suitable informants for the study.

I recruited two additional informants through personal network. The informants were recruited through the referral of my aunt and a friend of mine respectively.

Similarly, I assessed their suitability with the sampling criterion according to the referers' introduction, children's self-appraisal and my own observation.

The background information of the seven informants is summarized in Table 4-1:

Table 4-1 Profile of the sample

Informant	Name	Gender	Age	Occupation	Age at divorce	Years of parental divorce	Custodial parent	Resident parent/relative	Non-resident parent	Parents' marriage Status
C1	Xiao Jun 小俊	M	17	Middle school student	10	7	Father	Grandparent	Mother, Maintain contact	Both Single
C2	Xiao Yin 小銀	F	16	Middle school student	13*	3	Father	First Father then Uncle	Mother, Maintain contact	Both single
C3	Xiao Fang 小芳	F	16	Middle school student	7	9	Mother	Mother	Father, No contact with father	Mother Single. Father unknown
C4	An Jing 安靜	F	16	Middle school student	12	4	First Father then Mother	First Father then Mother	Father, Maintain contact	Father single. Mother had a boy friend at one time
C5	Yan Yan 炎炎	M	17	Middle school student	13	4	Mother	Mother	Father, Maintain contact	Mother single. Father has an intimate girl friend.
C6	Xiao Zong 小忠	M	18	Driver	12	6	Father	First Father then Mother	Father, Maintain contact	Both. Father had the second marriage failed.
C7	Jiong Jiong 炯炯	M	18	Undergraduate student	8	10	Mother	Mother	Father, Maintain contact	Mother single; Father had been remarried.

Data collection

Pilot study

Learning to ask good qualitative questions is not an easy job. As a fresh researcher, I learned through trial and error. To equip myself with basic experience and skills in conducting qualitative interviews, a pilot study was conducted in September 2005. The informant was a 17-year-old girl studying in a vocational school. Her parents divorced seven years ago when she was 10. The pilot study not only confirmed the existence of resilience in children of divorce, but also helped to revise the question guide.

After discussing the transcript with my supervisor, I found myself putting too much focus on feelings during the interview without adequately addressing the significant incidents and interpreting the incidents and the meaning or learning he/she made out of the experiences. As a result, I revised to include more questions such as, what are the significant events in their lives after divorce, how did they perceive the meaning of these experiences, etc. (See appendix 1, the revised final copy of question guide.)

Interview

In this research, a semi-structured interview format with specific questions asked in an open-ended manner that facilitated participants' descriptions of their experiences (Berg, 2005: 80) was used (see Appendix 1 for the guideline). Unscheduled probes were essential for clarification or enriching the data. Once the respondents were

contacted and they agreed to participate in the interview, a time and place for the interview was arranged at the convenience of respondents. The interview was conducted in Mandarin or Shanghainese.

Two stages of interview were conducted from September 2005 to January 2006. In the first interview, a brief introduction of the interviewer and the study were made. Background information was asked. I invited the interviewees to freely talk about their experience from the time of their parents' divorce. From the first interview I managed to get a brief understanding of the interviewee's life story, which could be roughly divided into life before the divorce, life immediately after the divorce, and the life post-divorce. In the end, the interviewees were asked for a permission of a second interview.

The second round of interviews with the five informants who had been interviewed in September 2005 was conducted in December 2005. Based on the first interview data, I asked for more detailed information concerning the interviewee's life experience. The interviewee was also asked to reflect on the influence of divorce on his/her own life course, as well as their perceptions of marriage and divorce. As mentioned, two additional informants were recruited and interviewed in December 2005. The follow-up interviews with these two informants were conducted through phone contacts when I returned to Hong Kong in January, 2006.

Data analysis

All the interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim into Chinese. After finishing data management, I read through the transcripts several times to get familiar with the data.

The strategy of “analytic induction” (Patton, 2002:454) was utilized to guide coding and categorizing. In analytic induction, the researcher looked for “sensitizing concepts” - concepts originating from propositions or theoretical frameworks that provide directions along which to look (Patton, 2002: 456). I started coding with the “sensitizing concept”- “what protects”- based on the child’s subjective experience. For instance, the excerpts in which an informant talked about how his mother helped him deal with his emotions was coded “PF- Mother Care”. The complex nature of life experience of the participating children was reflected from the number of coded categories. At one time I had over ninety categories. These categories were reviewed again carefully. Categories with related themes were combined; for instance, categories about what a mother had done to protect children from certain risk factors were put together under a new code “love and concern from mother”. I also carefully examined the fitness of each coding to a particular category. Incompatible coding was moved to another category or discarded.

As a result I got a simple and clear list of protective factors. The focus of analysis thus shifted from the context of interview data to the context of categories (Tutty, Rothery, Grinnel, 1996). I compared and contrasted the categories in order to discover the relationship between them.

With the identified protective factors, I started the search for protective mechanism. Previously, in searching for “what protects”, I had located the paragraph in the same informant’s narration on how the identified six common protective factor worked. These paragraphs are reviewed again to search for the particular risk factors that activate the protective factor. Take “love and concern from mother” as an example, the section in which the informant clearly stated that mother helped him coping with emotional distresses “LCM⁵- reduce- emotional stresses”. In this coding, the first indicates the protective factor, the second indicates the mechanism, and the last indicates the risk factor. Later, when I found that the word “reduce” could not encompass all the protective mechanism, some protective factors took effect by making up for the irreversible loss, so I used the word “compensate” to describe another kind of mechanism in which protective factors did not directly reduce risk factors. As a result, the list of codes had developed based on the transcripts (see Appendix 3).

Procedures to ensure credibility of the research

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the qualitative approach seeks to discover the thoughts and perceptions of informants, and attempts to capture people’s descriptions of events. As argued, there is no static or controllable social phenomena and human thoughts (Yuen-Tsange, 1997); it is naïve to believe that there is absolute truth in the

⁵ LCM is using the initial letter of the word “Love and concern from mother”. It eased the writing in the process of coding.

social world that can be tested and retested as has been done in quantitative research. Qualitative research uses “credibility” as the criteria to judge the trustworthiness of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The word “credibility” refers to “the extent to which credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (Yuen-Tsang, 1997).

Some techniques have been suggested to ensure the credibility of the research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study I used “member check” and “peer debriefing” as two techniques that are unique to qualitative methods. “Member check” gives the informant an opportunity to correct errors of fact and challenge what are perceived as wrong interpretations. Realizing the importance of member check, I invited the informants to read through the transcripts to check their accuracy. I also went back to two of the research participants by e-mail and shared with them my analysis and interpretations. Their confirmation of my interpretations was conducive to guarding my own biases dictating my conclusions.

“Peer debriefing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is another technique used to ensure the credibility of research findings. I invited three, disinterested peers - a personal friend of mine and two fellow research students who did not work on this topic – to do the coding and interpretation together. We discussed our differences in decisions about meaning units, categories, and themes. Our differences in coding and interpretation of coded texts helped me to honestly reflect on how my biases might influence my interpretation, and clarify the criterion for coding.

Ethical issues in the research

The following measures were made to ensure the participants' right to informed consent and their protection of privacy. I made a brief introduction of the research at the beginning of first interview. The introduction was facilitated with a written consent form (see Appendix 2) that specified the nature of the study, the procedures to be followed, the possible arousal of pain and sorrow when reviewing the divorce process, and the promise for necessary follow-up services for any discomfort aroused in the research interviews. Measures to ensure the principle of confidentiality were also clarified. For instance, each interviewee was given an anonym in the transcription and their personal data like name, school, and address would be kept strictly confidential and a pseudonym would be used in the thesis and future publications. Informants signed the consent form before I start the interview.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE SEVEN LIFE STORIES

Below are the life stories of seven informants who shared with me their experiences with little reservation. The presentation of life stores were a combination of the author's analyses and the informants' narratives (in quotation mark). To protect the privacy of the informant, a pseudonym was used in the following presentation of the seven informants' life stories.

Each life story includes two parts. The first part introduced the adolescent's background information. This part also dealt with the risk factors each informant encountered, since protective factor manifest itself through its interaction with risk factor, and the risk and protective factor are indispensable in the resilience process, the presentation of risk factors beforehand would facilitate our understanding of protective factor and resilience process. The second part contributed to a full description of protective factors a particular child owned in his/her post-divorce life.

Xiao Jun (小俊)

Xiao Jun (小俊) was 17 at the time of interview. Wearing a brand new red jacket, he looked fresh and energetic. He started talking about parental divorce and its impact with ease. "Divorce did not change me," he said. He showed his contentment by telling me, "Both my mother and my father still love me." This strongly contrasted with my imagination of what a child from a divorced family was like.

Xiao Jun (小俊) lived with paternal grandparents after he was born, for his parents were busy running their restaurant in another town. He only saw his parents on weekends, so he knew little about his parent's relationship. When he was ten, his grandma disclosed that his parents had been divorced. He was shocked and requested to clarify it from his parents. In front of his parents, Xiao Jun (小俊) broke down into bitter crying and wildly urging for parental union. All these efforts ended in ruin; his parents did not change their minds.

Immediately after the divorce, Xiao Jun (小俊) was haunted by the unresolved query of why his parents divorced. He kept thinking it over, even in class – his attention began to wander when he thought of the divorce, or he used to indulge himself in playing video games to get rid of the painful yet meaningless thinking. His grades in school fell dramatically as a result.

Xiao Jun was also bothered by the continuous hostility between his parents. As Xiao Jun (小俊) recalled his experience of being caught in-between their arguments over visiting arrangements, “I remembered once, I was at mother's home, father came and required me to go “home” with him...yet mother wanted me to stay for a few more days. Then they asked me for my decision. I couldn't help to burst into tears and shouted, ‘I did not know! Why on earth you two put me in such a dilemma!’”

Protective factor

The relationship between his parents improved, however, as time passed by. In a happy tone, Xiao Jun (小俊) told me that for the first time both of his parents attended

his 17th birthday party, and the two talked with ease. It was a great pleasure for Xiao Jun (小俊), for he was able to have both parents around him, rather than be forced to choose sides.

He also benefited from the love and support from both parents, despite the divorce and post-conflict that lasted for a long time. He talked of a good relationship with his mother. His mother kept visiting him, bringing money or other gifts during the visit. Especially on his birthday, his mother particularly bought him a birthday cake and cooked delicious dishes for the celebration. He also appreciated his father's kindness, as he said, "There had been many times that someone would like to introduce father [to] a woman for remarriage. But father refused. He had only one son that was me. He has made his mind to dedicate to me all of his love and attention." Xiao Jun (小俊) felt himself being very valued. He was also protected by his father's decision of remaining single, as he assumed that, "Life in a remarried family might be tough for a child."

A close relationship with paternal grandparents is perceived as protective, too. "They satisfied all of my needs, both material and intangible," Xiao Jun (小俊) said. "So I never had the feeling of being deprived." His grandparents dearly called Xiao Jun (小俊) "our little son" and took the responsibility of parenting when his parents were not around.

Xiao Jun (小俊) indicated that his maturity in understanding as he grew into adolescence was also helpful for him. He reflected that when he stepped into the adolescence stage, he started to adopt a positive way in viewing what happened. "Past

is past and looking back is useless,” he commented. “It is nonsense to mourn over what you have already lost. We should have the wisdom to see the positive aspect of change.” He was able to let go of past miseries and stay satisfied with what he had.

Xiao Yin (小銀)

Xiao Yin (小銀) is a 16-year-old girl. She is a little shy. She is not good at expressing herself and sometimes needed facilitation during the interview. Her parents divorced when she was 10. One day she came back from school and found that her mother had moved out.

Xiao Yin (小銀) has been perplexed by the question of “why parents divorced” ever since the divorce. Her parents never had open conflict in front of her before their separation. Her father was reserved, not giving Xiao Yin (小銀) any explanation about what had happened. She tried to ask her father for the reason, but her father instantly got furious and refused to answer. Xiao Yin (小銀) did not dare ask her father or mother again. The unresolved puzzle kept bothering her, however.

Xiao Yin (小銀) continued to show regret for the divorce. Due to her failure to have “father and mother together”, parental divorce made her feel “different” from her peers. It fell short of her ideal on family arrangement and family life. She dearly hoped for the reunion of her parents.

Protective factor

Though her parents had totally shut out the other party from their life after divorce (they never met each other after the divorce), both maintained a civil manner and neither of them spoke ill of the former spouse. Despite his reluctance to mention anything about his divorce, her father gave her complete freedom in contacting her mother. “You can see your mother whenever you like,” he said. Xiao Yin (小銀) felt relieved at hearing such a statement.

The regular and stable contact with her non-resident mother went a long way for satisfying her needs of being cared for. As she said, “Mother is the one that always stays around you. She takes care whenever it is too cold or too hot for you.” The clothes her mother bought for her were stylish for girls. Mother also knit sweaters for her. At the first interview, Xiao Yin (小銀) showed me with pride that, “This one I am wearing was knitted by my mother.”

Xiao Yin (小銀) has a close relationship with an uncle who helped restructure her environment to favor competence. Xiao Yin (小銀) emphasized that she liked her uncle’s way of treating her, because he was responsive to her feelings and he talked to her in an open and equal manner. She illustrated this with some live examples: “Once I did poor in the examination, he (uncle) admonished me. He did not scold me, instead, he talked rationally, and expressed his hope that I could work hard next time,” and, “When I did something wrong, he was angry with me. Sometimes he blamed me with harsh words, yet hours after that in the evening, he would apologize for being so harsh. He told me that he did not mean to hurt me. But he stressed that I must realize what I

had done wrong.” Xiao Yin (小銀) concluded that she had made consistent progress with her uncle’s discipline and supervision.

Xiao Yin (小銀) had some friends as a source of fun. Studying in high school now, she had the companionship of her two classmates. The three girls went to school and then went home together. Their companionship had driven away her grievances and sorrow, as she put it: “When we were together, we’d like to tell jokes, or guess riddles. I am not good at joking. My friends made it better. Staying with them, I felt unhappiness went away while happiness came along.” She also had a good friend whom she shared her “family secret” with. The friend had helped her overcome the frustration due to father’s failure to properly respond to her unresolved query on the reason of divorce.

Xiao Yin (小銀) had developed her own way of effectively getting rid of the displeasing feeling, ‘forget it, forget it, I do not want to remember it’. I kept repeating the sentence for a few times; when I woke up I found it run out of my mind.”

Xiao Fang (小芳)

Xiao Fang (小芳) was 16 years old at the time of interview. Short hair, five-feet tall, dressed in plain clothes, she looked younger than her same age counterparts. Yet, as soon as she started talking she showed her above-average maturity.

Her parents divorced when she was seven. She lived with her mother from then on. Looking back ten years later, Xiao Fang (小芳) talked of her post-divorce life experience in a fairly optimistic tone, though life difficulties were unavoidable.

Xiao Fang (小芳) has not seen her father since the divorce. Loss of contact with her father seems to exert little influence on Xiao Fang (小芳). Literally, she showed no regret over losing a father who was “irresponsible and uncaring,” as her mother described. Yet she continued using “that person” to indicate her father. She was observed to be uncomfortable when I deliberately used “your father” in the interview. I assume there might be some unresolved emotions relating to her father in the deep bottom of her heart.

Financial difficulty was noted by Xiao Fang (小芳) as one of significant challenges in post-divorce life. Her mother started to work after the divorce. Her uncle introduced her to a job in a forage store owned by his friend. Xiao Fang (小芳) was not clear on how much payment her mother received, yet as she recalled, immediately after the divorce, with no savings her mother’s income barely met their basic expenses, not to mention any money to buy snacks or pretty dresses.

Protective factor

Xiao Fang (小芳) felt herself being loved and cared for dearly by her resident mother who could “compensate for the loss of an unqualified father,” and thus, “With or without that person (her father), it means no difference for me.” When asked to give concrete examples of how her mother “did well to her,” Xiao Fang (小芳)

recalled, “When I was young, we were very poor. Someone once gave us a few pieces of candy. Mother left them all to Xiao Fang (小芳), eating none herself.” In her definition, a good mother is a person who willingly sacrifices her own pleasure for the needs of children.

Xiao Fang (小芳) had a good friend who was an important “reservoir” of intimacy and love when she was in junior school. Xiao Fang (小芳) was proud that she had a friend in front of whom she could pour out of her thoughts without fear being judged, and the friend did the same to her.

Acknowledging the self-strength fostered in post-divorce life boosted her spirit and saved her from feeling self-pity. Xiao Fang (小芳) reflected that she had learned a lot from the experience of being a helper in the forage store where her mother worked. She started to help her mother in business when she was nine years old. To win more customers, Xiao Fang (小芳) actively reached out to potential customers in the bazaar by asking them to buy the feeding stuff from her mother. People found it interesting to talk with such a young “saleswoman”, and most of them considered it heartless to reject her request. Later, Xiao Fang (小芳) replaced her mother on Saturday and Sunday mornings so that mother could have more rest hours. This additional job did not over-burden her. Instead, she quite enjoyed it and felt herself steeled from these experiences. As she put it, “I find I know more than others (peers). Sometimes when I was in the shop and someone entered, as I am experienced in contacting various kinds of people, I knew immediately what kind of person he/she was, and I was clear about what to say and what to do.”

An Jing (安靜)

“Cooking, washing...all were done by me when I was 12 (after parental divorce).”

An Jing (安靜) gave me a big smile while tears remained in her eyes, “Unimaginable? But I have made it.” It is a touching piece for me. As her prideful smile accompanies regretful tears, her life is a mix of sorrow and joy.

Her mother filed for divorce due to her failure to bear her husband’s persistent violent behavior. Her father threatened to defy the divorce unless her mother gave up child custody. An Jing (安靜) remembered what the judge told her: “If you do not agree to live with father, you mother cannot get divorced.” Without given any real choice, An Jing (安靜) compromised for the sake of her mother.

That her father was rarely at home after the divorce compelled An Jing (安靜) to take all of the cooking and washing, and to take care of herself. That age-inappropriate task over-burdened her, as An Jing (安靜) recalled bitter memories, “No one is available to help me. So I have to do it myself”. She explained with a bitter smile, “Otherwise I would die of starvation.” She remembered that once on a winter night she came back from school and was busy preparing for dinner. She could smell the fragrance of cooked rice floating from next door where the family of her uncle lived, yet none invited her to have dinner with them. Cold and hungry, she wept bitter tears of pity, mourning her misery. “I was sad. I asked myself why I had to suffer all this stuff. Life was unequal. Why was it me, only me, that had such a bad fate!”

Worse still, sometimes her father lost his temper and laid violent hands on her. Immediately after the divorce, her father regretted the divorce and wanted his wife

back. While he could not find her, he threatened An Jing (安靜) to disclose her mother's whereabouts. She vividly remembered that her father once went to her school and asked her where her mother was. While An Jing (安靜) refused to answer, her father got furious and hit her on the face and kicked her. Her eyes turned black and her head was severely bumped. Finally, her father stopped due to her continuous begging. The school teacher sent An Jing (安靜) to the hospital. This was the most violent, but not the only, occurrence of father's violent behavior.

Protective factor

Life had been quite stressful with these challenges, yet An Jing (安靜) managed to protect herself from practical and emotional difficulties. To shield herself from the physical abuse, she developed some effective tactics to deal with her violent father – she told me that she pretended to be fast asleep when her father came back drunk late at night, because when he was drunk he was more likely to lose his temper and act violently. Also, when her father was calm, she would talk with him and seek support from him. She said to her father, “You should be good to me. Since you wanted me (to live with you), you should treat me well.” Her father was silent. He started to be gentle occasionally. Furthermore, An Jing (安靜) never gave up her bargaining with her father on the change of the custody arrangement. Finally, she was allowed to move in with her mother 14 months after the completion of the divorce.

An Jing had a particular way to talk to herself and cheer herself up, as she said, “I thought about unhappy things first; then I turned to happy memories..... With painful

memories, my eyes were filled by tears. Then I recalled those jolly times, so that I became happy again.” It looks like An Jing (安靜) deliberately constructed a memory bank of joyful experiences on which to build the edifice of comfort. She consciously loaded the memories that had a likelihood of yielding pleasure and enjoyment in a time of misery. By recalling these joyful moments she restored her mood.

An Jing (安靜) also used to play self-invented games to vent her anger and sorrow. One was to play with water. As she described it to me, “It is exciting...playing water... I’ll tell you how to play. Find a pool, or let the water fill the bathtub to the rim. Then, you flap the water’s surface...like that... Drops splash out of the bathtub, dripping on my face. It is exhilarating, refreshing...that kind of feeling. (It helps me) pour out all the sadness and anger.” At the interview, An Jing (安靜) simulated how she beat the water’s surface by raising up her hand and then flapping it down at full tilt. Her face was lit up by an excited smile as she was doing so. It was an effective way of cheering her up.

An Jing (安靜) had a strong sense of accomplishment for having overcome so many challenges in life. As she put it, “Without the past experience, I would not behave as well as I do now. If I was under the shield of parents, how can I grow competent?” She felt that her experience was painful but worthwhile, which fostered her capabilities and competence in dealing with challenges. “Now I am admired for my competence (by teachers and peers). I am clearly aware that my capabilities grew out of previous years (of suffering and struggle) ...I learned a lot from past.” What a tough girl!

Yan Yan (炎炎)

Yan Yan (炎炎) was 17 at the interview, studying in vocational school and graduating in a year. He planned to seek for a job so that he could rely on himself and thus eased his mother's burden. He was sure that he would become more mature and competent in the future. He hoped that he could reciprocate for his mother the close relations both financially and emotionally as soon as possible.

His parents divorced when he was 13. The reason for divorce, with his understanding, was the conflict between his parents. "At least one small argument every day, and a big quarrel every three or four days," he described. His father leaving caused a decrease of family income, which worried Yan Yan (炎炎) to a large extent. He told me that, "The only problem caused by (parental) divorce is money problem." His resident mother failed to secure a stable job after the divorce. His father gave him only 300-400 Yuan a month⁶ as maintenance. Sometimes he even delayed the payment. It was inconvenient to contact his father; Yan Yan (炎炎) complained that sometimes he could not reach his father in an emergency, such as when additional fees for school were charged. "Before when father was home, I could ask him directly for the money. Once he left... I had to call him, yet he used to switch off his mobile phone, and I did not know his home phone number, (so that I could not contact him). No contact, no money, at last my mother had to borrow money from neighbors."

⁶ By the price level in today's Shanghai, it cost an adolescent boy about 10 Yuan a day for food and drink of average standard. That is to say, father's payment is a limited number which failed to cover other miscellaneous but essential expenses.

Yan Yan expressed his dissatisfaction and disappointment due to an indifferent and distant father after the divorce. Father was a “cheapskate” and would like “money kept only in his pocket,” so he ignored the hard-up life Yan Yan (炎炎) was living and refused to pay more than legally required to provide a more comfortable life. Yan Yan (炎炎) was also disappointed by his father’s behavior that kept him away from his life. He did not invite Yan Yan (炎炎) to visit him in his residence after the divorce, nor did he give Yan Yan (炎炎) his home phone number. Father and son usually met at the gate of the supermarket or other public places. Once Yan Yan (炎炎) heard that his father was sick and he called father and expressed that he wanted to visit him, yet his father refused to tell him the exact address of his home. In reminiscing these memories, Yan Yan (炎炎) sighed for the distant relationship and expressed that he was powerless to do anything about it.

Yan Yan (炎炎) felt himself being caught in the covert conflict between his parents after divorce. Without a clear statement, his mother still bore resentment towards her ex-husband. As Yan Yan (炎炎) observed, “Mother appeared displeased when she heard I took a mild tone in talking with father on phone. She thought I should be tough on him.” Mother’s attitude bothered Yan Yan (炎炎), for “Mother started to look upon me in a different way (if I cannot request money from father). She was disappointed on me.” However, he was reluctant to treat father in an impolite manner, because, “After all, he is my father. He is not benevolent, but I cannot be heartless.” The overt family conflict transformed into an inner conflict in Yan Yan (炎炎). He gave a deep sigh during his interview.

Protective factor

Yan Yan (炎炎) had a loving and supportive mother. His mother directly discussed with him the reason of the divorce, which served to head off the youngster's potential fantasies that he was part of the marital difficulties, and therefore, responsible for the divorce. As Yan Yan (炎炎) put it, "Mother told me that she and father were divorced. They were separated since then and forever. She said that it was nothing to do with me and that I should pay attention to my studies. It is too early for me to understand such a matter. When I grow older, go to work or further study, I will be more capable in comprehending what had happened to them."

Communication is important not only during the crisis of divorce. In this single-parent family, smooth communication served to increase the intimacy between mother and son and developed a strong mother and son bond, which helped alleviate his regret on having a distant father. Yan Yan (炎炎) commented that, "Our (he and his mother) communication is a sincere one. It really helped me out." Mother scheduled fixed time for talks with Yan Yan (炎炎), who recalled, "Since my father moved out, mother had an in-depth talk with me one once a week." His mother showed her interest in his activities, friends, and school. "It (the content of the talk) is not necessarily about father, or divorce. We just have a chat, about everything."

The economic pressure, as Yan Yan (炎炎) mentioned, had been alleviated by the economic provision from relatives. Yan Yan (炎炎) pointed out that maternal relations played an important role in sustaining a basic standard of living for him and his mother. His uncle bought him clothes as gifts. He had lunch and dinner in his

grandmother's home for free. He was convinced that, "It is owing to the help from relatives (that I can wear tidy clothes and sufficient food)." According to Yan Yan (炎炎), it had been the tradition of mutual support in his mother's extended family. Based on past experiences, he is confident that "They (relatives) will help me whenever it is needed."

In addition to being supported directly, Yan Yan (炎炎) talked of his relatives providing emotional support to his mother, and thus benefiting him by ensuring a well-adjusted mother. To quote him, "My uncle and grandmother try to cheer her up in each occasion they meet mother; for instance, during a dinner in my grandmother's home, or a gathering for celebrating Chinese New Year. My uncle told my mother to take it easy, not to worry too much. They convinced my mother that the most important thing is to take good care of herself and me." From his observation, his mother remained calm after the divorce. Yan Yan (炎炎) was supported indirectly by having a well-adjusted mother who provided qualified parenting.

Yan Yan (炎炎) had the habit of entertaining himself by listening to music, as he delineated, "When I am under pressure I like listening to pop songs. Music helps me escape from the pressure. When I am in a low mood, or am stressed, I indulge myself in music and leave the unhappiness behind."

Yan Yan (炎炎) held a positive perception on divorce so that he was able to appreciate the positive aspect of divorce without denying the negative effects. As he commented, "It (divorce) has both benefits and harms. The benefit is...supposedly, you will not feel well if everyday you hear your parents quarreling when back home,

will you? By comparison, I prefer what it is like now. I would rather they separate. At least, divorce brought calmness at home.”

Xiao Zhong (小忠)

Xiao Zhong (小忠) was 18 at the time of the interview. He was tall, slim, with a square face that made him look mature and serious. He turned out to be a little shy when he began to talk, especially when he was given some questions that he did not know how to answer. He stared at the floor, thinking it over, and gave me a sorry smile without saying anything. Sometimes I gave up further probing upon his silent request.

After graduating from a vocational middle school, Xiao Zhong (小忠) stayed idle for a few months and then started to work as a taxi driver. He was the only participant who was working in the study. His most recent news was that he made a girlfriend and enjoyed such a stable romantic relationship.

His parents divorced when he was 12. Against the child's own will, the judge awarded his father custody. Recalling back, Xiao Zhong (小忠) was still full of anger about his father's inadequate parenting. “My father, as I see, is dirty and untidy,” he complained. “The dishes cooked by him tasted awful. He used to blend orts and leftovers, and cook them together. So this is called a meal. Sometimes the food went sour, yet he said in an indifferent tone, “eat it, it won't harm you.” Sometimes Xiao Zhong (小忠) refused to eat and starved. He also complained that his father paid little

attention to him. Once he stayed overnight in the video-game room and went to school directly afterwards, yet his father failed to notice that he had been missing for 36 hours. Xiao Zhong (小忠) was bitterly disappointed by his father's indifference. At that time, Xiao Zhong used to wander outside or spend most of his leisure time in the video-game room. He fell asleep in classes or was even absent from school. He had his worst school record in this period of life.

For better food and drink, Xiao Zhong (小忠) turned to his mother for support. However, at that time his father was still angry with his ex-wife and thus prohibited Xiao Zhong's mother from meeting with him (小忠). He scolded or even beat his son if he found Xiao Zhong (小忠) in contact with his mother via phone or visiting his mother without permission. To break off the mother-son connection, his father even sent Xiao Zhong (小忠) to his former ayah's home in the country far away for two months of summer holidays.

Xiao Zhong (小忠) went to live with his mother a year later, and life became stable. Yet he has been caught in the covert parental conflict related to maintenance since then. His father was broke due to unemployment and failure in his own business. As a result, his mother alone paid for all of his tuition fees and living expenses. Thinking it was unfair to her, his mother urged him to visit his father and ask for money. As Xiao Zhong (小忠) recalled, "Mother said that she has in no position to urge father; that I was his son and I had the right. So I went, with some money back." The journey of asking for money was never a satisfactory one. He was caught in a covert struggle for money between parents. On one side was his mother who pushed him to ask for

money for his sake; on the other side, as Xiao Zhong (小忠) put it, “As soon as father saw me, he knew I was coming for money. Sometimes I did not get even a penny; sometimes I received a little.” Xiao Zhong (小忠) admitted that, “It had some negative psychological influence on me,” though he failed to elaborate what kind influence it was. We can speculate that being caught in-between for years might be an unpleasant experience for a child.

Protective factor

Xiao Zhong (小忠) manifested his free agency and capability to act on his own will in his fight with father for the right of keeping contact with his mother. Despite his father’s threats, he secretly called his mother when his father was not home. If school closed earlier than usual, he walked to his mother’s workplace or residence and stayed for a while and then came back home; when his mother transferred to work in another town, he saved his pocket money for the bus fare to his mother’s workplace. At last his father compromised and allowed Xiao Zhong (小忠) to live with his mother, though namely he was still the custodial parent.

The non-resident mother’s continuous involvement shielded Xiao Zhong (小忠) from the potential harm of inadequate care by his father. His mother catered to his needs for better food than what was prepared by his father. After his mother moved to work in another town, she bought Xiao Zhong (小忠) bunches of fast-cooking noodles that were acceptable in taste and easy to cook.

After taking the role of the resident mother, she provided a stable environment that proved to effectively counteract the child's insecure feelings aroused by divorce and the unpleasant memories of living with his father. Xiao Zhong (小忠) pictured an episode of dinner to illustrate this point. To quote him, "Each afternoon when I got back from school, I saw mother busy preparing dinner in the kitchen. I put down my bag, washed my hands, watched TV for a while, and we (mother and Xiao Zhong) had dinner together. I found it no different from my previous life (before divorce)." The seemingly ordinary scene of family life meant a lot to Xiao Zhong (小忠). He still had a stable home with "mothers always there (despite father having left)." "Living with mother is much more comfortable," Xiao Zhong (小忠) commented. "It is always the mother who cares for you." After moving to live with his mother, he transferred schools and caught up with his missed classes.

Spending time with friends and having fun in school helped him restore a good mood. As he said, "Playing with my classmates (made me happy). (During the play) I forgot all those miseries. Staying with them I never took the time to think unhappy things." Xiao Zhong (小忠) told me that most of his classmates were friendly and easy to deal with. While doing various activities together with friends, he managed to take his mind off bitter thoughts.

Jiong Jiong (炯炯)

I called Jiong Jiong (炯炯) and we arranged to meet in a KFC. I had to cross a bridge linking to the entry of the restaurant. On the bridge, I noticed a boy in a yellow down jacket looking at the shuttling buses in the crowded streets. Crowds of people come and go; he is the only exception to this hustle and bustle.

Later, when I described my feeling of that moment, I saw a smile glistening in his eyes; “Partly you are right,” he said, “I am a quiet person.” His hobbies were reading and writing. He played the violin well. He had attended oil painting class for years. All of this made him attractive to girls on campus, as he was a freshman in a university in Shanghai. He was 18 at the time of interview.

His parents separated when he was eight years old. It was after a big conflict that his mother left the matrimonial home and moved back to her maiden home home. Later his parents signed a divorce agreement. Though his parents did not explain to him the reason of divorce, Jiong Jiong (炯炯) learned from observation that his “mother and father are of different kinds” and “they would be divorced sooner or later.” He reported no parental conflict after the divorce. His father was remarried and had a baby daughter, while his mother remained single.

Jiong Jiong (炯炯) expressed his pity for the distant relationship with his father by saying that, “When I was in middle school, I was badly in need of a person that could discipline me, control me, but none did, including my mother. It should be the role father played. But he wasn’t.” Jiong Jiong (炯炯) held that the “absence of his father” in his developmental pathway attributed to his lack of masculinity, for he failed to

have a paternal role model on a daily basis. Immediately after the divorce, his father seemingly had vented his anger on Jiong Jiong (炯炯). In the summer vacation following the divorce, his father offered to take care of Jiong Jiong (炯炯) in his workplace in the daytime. However, on the way to where he worked, his father used to hit Jiong Jiong's and pinched the child's arms. Father also threatened him not to speak up. Ultimately, Jiong Jiong (炯炯) could not bear the pain and told his mother. Mother was shocked and took Jiong Jiong (炯炯) back. That unpleasant event cast a shadow on the father-son relationship. When Jiong Jiong was in middle school, his father took little participation in his education. It was not until Jiong Jiong (炯炯) entered university that his father began to show interest in his son, as Jiong Jiong (炯炯) held. Yet it seemed too late; Jiong Jiong (炯炯) felt that, "Father and I are people living in different worlds. We cannot deal with each other."

Protective factor

Jiong Jiong (炯炯) enjoyed a close relationship with his mother that worked as a "powerful backing" emotionally. As he said, "Whenever I met something (challenging), I would turn to mother. It is mother and only mother that I could confide in and in front of whom I vented out all my feelings and thoughts. Though sometimes mother could not give me practical suggestions, she could comfort me with words expressive of affection. It sufficed."

Maternal relatives supported Jiong Jiong (炯炯) and his mother financially. The financial support took the form of money or food, clothes, or other living necessities

as gifts. Aunts and uncles also frequently invited him to spend weekends with them. It was another type of financial support for Jiong Jiong (炯炯), for the relatives often bought him gifts during these occasions and did not receive any form of payment.

Jiong Jiong (炯炯) also enjoyed a close relationship with maternal relatives, which made up for his distant relationship with his non-resident father. “Often I felt that they were my blood brothers,” he said in an expressive tone. “It is a close relationship that otherwise a one-child-in-a-family would not have the privilege to enjoy.” He felt there was a strong connection between him and his cousin brothers. He met them frequently during family gatherings. The boys played basketball together on weekends. Jiong Jiong (炯炯) also mentioned his communication with his uncle and auntie. He used to ask his uncle for advice when he was required to make a decision on something, like choosing a major and which university to study in. He enjoyed talking with his auntie about the thoughts of Greek philosophers like Plato, for both were interested in philosophy. It seems that the connection with cousins, uncles, and aunties filled up the vacancy his father left in his “affection world.”

Also, Jiong Jiong was fortunate enough to know “big dad”, a wise and farsighted old man who exerted a positive influence on Jiong Jiong (炯炯) in various ways. As Jiong Jiong (炯炯) said, “His (‘big dad’s’) influence on me, as you can see, varies from a trifle matter like how to fold the clothes to my values and philosophies...He is such an important person in my life.” In terms of financial support, “big dad” sponsored Jiong Jiong to learn violin and painting. Without his help, Jiong Jiong (炯炯) could not afford the expenses of musical and drawing classes. Besides, through

sharing his life experiences, “big dad” influenced Jiong Jiong’s view on how life and career should be. “Big dad” opened a door for him towards a big and exciting world. He talked to Jiong Jiong (炯炯) about his life experiences of traveling all over the world. It was owing to his sharing that Jiong Jiong (炯炯) set up his goal to work in the United Nations one day, for it can offer an opportunity to travel and come across different peoples and cultures.

Jiong Jiong (炯炯) was fond of reading. He stressed that he learned a lot from books. He considered himself as “a person that used to think of a lot,” and thus, “many of my questions could be answered by what I have learned from books.” He explained to me how he could take an objective view on the impact of divorce by comparing it in an objective way in aesthetic appreciation. To quote him, “I read some writings of Zhu Guang Qian⁷. According to him, to step outside the scene and took at the outside role could be one way of appreciating (artistic productions). One is advised to view all occurrences, including his own life, from some distance. (From it I realized that) we should take an objective stance in evaluating what had occurred to us.”

Jiong Jiong (炯炯) effectively applied these esthetical principles in his developing a positive perception on divorce. He acknowledged both the harms and benefits of divorce. He reasoned that, “Parents should not stay in a conflict marriage for the sake of their child/children,” because, “If a couple led a life without happiness, it is better for them to separate. Otherwise the child certainly would be hurt.” Jiong Jiong (炯炯)

⁷ Zhu Guang Qian (1897-1986): distinguished Chinese litterateur, esthetician and translator

held that a calm and caring environment is more important for the child than an apparently “intact” family structure. He noted his gains in addition to losses in post-divorce life, as he said, “(Despite what I have been deprived of), I am appreciative for what I have been awarded,” and that, “My life is O.K., though father left because of divorce, there is adequate support from relatives.”

CHAPTER SIX: COMMON PROTECTIVE FACTORS AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

The seven life stories in the last chapter have delineated how, for particular adolescents, a variety of protective factors helped them fight risk factors. This chapter will summarize the common protective factors and how these factors work out their protective function.

Common protective factors

By comparing the informants' experiences of divorce adjustment, I found some protective factors that were recurrently mentioned by informants. They were: (1) Love and concern from at least one parent, (2) Financial support from kin and non-kin, (3) Emotional support from kin and non-kin adults to supplement parenting, (4) Peer support or companions, (5) Capabilities in dealing with lingering pain and sorrow.

Love and concern from at least one parent, particularly the mother in a Chinese context

It is interesting to note that most informants mentioned their mother's love and concern as protective. With no regard to who is the custodial or resident parent, the mother remains the major source of daily care and emotional support. Children living with their mother reported a great continuity of being taken care of well, as their mothers were usually the one responsible for daily care before divorce. As Xiao

Zhong (小忠) commented, “Living with mother is much more comfortable. It is always my mother who cares for me.” Xiao Fang (小芳) expressed similar opinions. Despite the straining financial condition, her mother was capable enough to manage household affairs to give the child a clean and comfortable home to live in.

For children living with their fathers after divorce, the continually involved non-resident mothers showed their love in terms of satisfying the child’s daily needs for regular diet and basic hygiene. For instance, mother bought nice clothes for Xiao Yin (小銀); Xiao Zhong (小忠) turned to his mother’s residence when he starved, as father “provided terrible food”.

Mothers also worked effectively in helping their children get over worries. They managed it through constructing a family environment with open communication and stable structure. Yan Yan’s (炎炎) mother was the only one who made an open and direct dialogue with the child on the reason of parental divorce. According to Yan Yan, immediately after the divorce, mother had a talk with Yan Yan in which she explained that “parental divorce was nothing to do with the me” and gave Yan Yan (炎炎) the clear instruction that “I should pay attention to my study. I am still too young to fully understand all the issues. (However, my mother has assured me that) when I grow older, I will be more capable in comprehending what had happened to them“. Yan Yan was appreciative of his mother’s sensitivity and consideration on his need for an age-appropriate explanation and reassurance. For another instance, Jiong Jiong’s (炯炯) mother played the role of a faithful listener. Jiong Jiong (炯炯) expressed that “it

is my mother whom I confide in and she is the only one I can vent all my feelings and thoughts”.

It seems that the mothers atoned for the solo parenting by having their love and concern doubled. The abundant love from the mothers satisfied the children's needs, materially and intangibly; this downplays the possible negative influence caused by the fathers' little involvement in child-care.

Strongly contrasted with the significance of a mother in the children's life is that the fathers were rarely mentioned as the source of warmth and support - in some cases unqualified fathers turned to be a risk factor in the process of the children's adjustment to divorce. Why there is such a strong gender difference in fathering and mothering is an interesting issue that will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Financial support from kin and non-kin adults

Many informants reported having received financial support from relatives. Most of this support came from the resident parent's extended family. One informant, Jiong Jiong (炯炯), mentioned financial support from a non-kin adult, his “big dad.” The economic provision could be the money directly given to the child. Jiong Jiong's uncles and aunts used to give him pocket money on family gatherings. It more commonly took the form of gifts or sponsoring. For instance, Yan Yan's (炎炎) younger uncle bought him clothes as gifts; his grandmother prepared his lunch everyday without requiring any payment. Xiao Yin's (小銀) uncle paid the tuition fees

and living expenses for her after her entering high school. “Big dad” sponsored Jiong Jiong’s (炯炯) learning of violin and painting since primary school.

However, despite the financial support obtained from relatives and other non-kin, some informants in single-mother households did experience financial hardship. It suggested that not every single-parent household obtained adequate tangible assistance from kinship. It was also possible that despite the financial support available, it could not totally alleviate the financial hardship.

Emotional support from kin and non-kin adults

Emotional support from kin and non-kin adults varies. For instance, Jiong Jiong (炯炯) had close relationships with his aunts and uncles. There was a strong emotional connection between Jiong Jiong (炯炯) and his relatives. He felt himself living in a big family with people who were concerned for his feelings and who could give suggestions to his inquiries. Jiong Jiong (炯炯) also had a “big dad” who played the role of a good teacher and a helpful friend. As he commented:

“One day when I was folding the clothes, I suddenly realized that I’ve done them accurately the way ‘big dad’ did so. I suddenly realized...his (‘big dad’) influence on me, you can identify it in things as trifle as the way of folding clothes, or as significant as my values...He is such an important person in my life...I was really lucky to know him and had him taught me so many things ”

For another instance, Xiao Yin (小銀) received discipline and supervision from an uncle with whom she had lived with since last year. To quote her expression:

“When I did something wrong, he (uncle) scolded me, sometimes he blamed me with harsh words...yet hours after that, in the evening, my uncle would come to me and apologize for his rudeness. He said that he did not mean to hurt me. Meanwhile he emphasized that I should acknowledge my mistake and never made it again.”

Xiao Yin (小銀) admitted that she liked uncle's way of reasoning. Compared to her parents, Xiao Yin felt that her uncle was more responsive to her feelings and thoughts, and preferred to use reasoning in education.

The emotional support provided to the parent was found to be protective for the child, too. Yan Yan's (炎炎) mother got comfort and consolation from her siblings and parents. It helped lift her emotional burden and helped her become a more qualified parent. Having a supportive mother protected Yan Yan (炎炎). Yan Yan (炎炎) felt himself benefiting from having a well-functioning mother whose adjustment had been well supported by maternal relatives.

These various forms of emotional support exerted their protective influence through distinct ways. The strong emotional connection with relatives or non-kin adults made up for the distant relationship with the non-resident parent. The appropriate discipline served as a supplement to parenting, and the support to the parent ensured the child received adequate care from a competent, well-adjusted parent. As a whole, these caring adults protected the child by securing him/her a warm and supportive environment in which to grow up.

Peer companions

While informants attached great importance to parents and kin adults in their post-divorce life, most of them regarded peers are only “playmates” or casual acquaintance. It is contrary to the Western findings in which those who in adolescence stage have become increasingly more involved with friends than with parents and other family members (Seiffge-Kenke, 1995).

Only two girls, Xiao Yin (小銀) and Xiao Fang (小芳), told me that they had an intimate friend that meant more to them than “playmates.” Xiao Fang (小芳) used to share everything that happened with her friend, and that friend did the same to her. Xiao Yin (小銀) thought that because of the similar family background with her friend (the friends whose parents also divorced), she felt at ease talking with her friend about what happened in the family. The intimate relationship with a close friend served as an important source of love and sympathy. Xiao Fang (小芳) felt that she could understand and be understood by her best friend. That kind of mutual understanding was a great treasure for the girl – she never felt alone.

For others, though they rarely turned to friends for sharing and intimacy, they expressed that they had a lot of fun by spending the leisure time with peers, like sports, video games, chatting, sharing interesting stories, or window-shopping. As Xiao Zhong (小忠) said, “Staying with them I never took time to think unhappy things.” His claim was echoed by Xiao Yin (小銀), who expressed in a light tone, “Staying with them, I felt unhappiness went away while happiness came along.”

Capabilities in coping with lingering pain and sorrow

Almost all informants reported that they had particular ways of comforting themselves when they were distressed by lingering pain and sorrow. These adolescents had a wide range of ways of coping strategies, which show their abilities in dealing with emotional distresses.

Conductive coping strategies

Some chose to be engaged in some activities; for instance, reading for Jiong Jiong (炯炯), listening to music for Yan Yan (炎炎), and An Jing (安靜) invented some games such as playing with water or simulating the amusing gesture she learned from a TV performance.

They also used self-dialogue to comfort and console themselves. Xiao Yin (小銀) would continually say to herself “forget it (the unhappiness)” until she felt these negative thoughts walk out of her mind. An Jing (安靜) successfully constructed a bank of joyful memory and experiences. She consciously loaded the memories that have likelihood of yielding pleasure and enjoyment. She put it in this way:

“At first I thought about unhappy things; then I turned to those happy memories...since I believe in “sweet comes from bitterness” ... With painful memories, my eyes were filled by tears. Then I recalled to those joyful moments...and I became cheered up.”

A positive thinking of divorce

Informants who were able to think positively experienced divorce as an opportunity, a possible solution to the persistent family problem rather than merely a loss. Children

who lived in a family of conflict felt great relief for the parental separation. Both Jiong Jiong (炯炯) and Yan Yan (炎炎) expressed that they benefited from a calm and peaceful living environment. Recognizing the potential benefits of post-divorce life made it easy for adolescents to accept the fact of divorce. Yan Yan reasoned that the divorce was “the (acceptable) method when out of method”, given the chaotic family environment. He said:

“I have thought it through. It (divorce) has both benefits and harms. The benefit is...supposedly, you will not feel well if everyday you hear your parents quarreling when back home, will you? By comparison, I prefer what it is like now. I would rather they separate than they stay together and never stop tangling with each other”.

Informants also acknowledged that they had learned a lot from the experience of living through the hardships of post-divorce life. Xiao Fang (小芳) reflected that she learned to deal with different kinds of people from helping her mother do business in the forage store. She was confident of her social skills. An Jing (安靜) expressed that she was proud of her above-average competence fostered by past painful and chaotic life experiences. She told me that:

“Now I was admired for my competence (by teachers and peers). I was clearly aware that my capabilities grew out of previous years (of suffering and struggle) ...I learned a lot from past.”

Overall, these children’s ability in dealing with lingering pain and sorrow is indeed impressive. To quote William James,⁸ “The greatest revolution of our times is the

discovery that human beings, by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the inner aspects of their lives.” Informants’ mastery of their negative emotions saved them from crying for their misfortunes.

Such capability even helped turn adversity into an opportunity to grow. As success was scored in coping with negative emotions, strength was gathered and confidence was built, and a repertoire of coping skills was developed. Children from divorced families have become capable, composed, and optimistic youth despite temporary relapse into unpleasant memories.

Protective mechanisms: How protective factors work with risk factors

So far we have identified some common protective factors. Yet we should never be satisfied with having such a list. Garmezy (1985) suggested three stages in resilience research. Stage 1 is to identify children at risk who demonstrate good coping abilities and adaptive behaviors. Stage 2 is to search for the protective factors correlating to positive adaptation in stressful circumstances. I have made such a trial in the above discussion. Stage 3 involves the identification of mechanisms that underlie the manifestations of stress-resistant behaviors. The ultimate goal is to clarify how these identified protective factors protect individuals from stress. Because of the importance of the topic, I wish to make some preliminary discussion on the protective mechanisms, despite the fact that the data I gathered on this aspect is comparatively

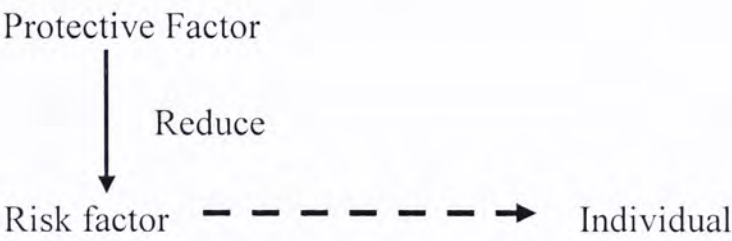
⁸ William James (1842-1979), psychologist, emphasized the notion of the person as a continuous “stream of consciousness” capable of exercising free will.

limited. The following is only the beginning of an attempt not yet fully realized at this stage.

Protective factors reduce risk factors

Parental divorce led to the occurrence of certain risk factor that posed additional difficulties to a child’s normal development. These risk factors shrank or ceased to exist due to the intervention of certain protective factors. The risk level of the risk factors was less acute or less in intensity. The process is illustrated by Figure 6-1.

Figure 6-1 A protective factor works to reduce or eliminate a risk factor



For instance, financial support from relatives helped solve the financial strain in Yan Yan’s (炎炎) life. Owing to his father’s limited payment and his mother’s unstable income, Yan Yan (炎炎) and his mother lived a life that could barely meet their basic needs in nutrients and clothing. In response, maternal relatives provided them additional money, food, and clothes without requiring any payment. These tangible provisions relieved the financial difficulties and raised Yan Yan (炎炎) and his mother’s living standard to a relatively comfortable level. Just as Yan Yan expressed,

“It is owing to the help from relatives (that I can wear tidy clothes and sufficient food)...there had been the tradition of mutual support in my mother’s home. I believe that they (relatives) will help me whenever I need help.”

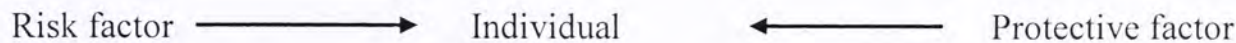
Similarly, financial support from maternal uncles, aunts, and “big dad” helped Jiong Jiong (炯炯) out of a poverty-stricken life; it relieved him from worrying about the family economic condition or being restricted to various opportunities simply for the reason of lack of money.

Another eliminating effect has been identified in the interaction of appropriate psychological concern and assurance from a parent for emotional stresses in children caused by parental divorce. Yan Yan’s (炎炎) mother gave her son an age appropriate explanation on the cause of the divorce and assurance on her love on him. It protected him from being consumed by the unresolved query of the reason of the divorce. Xiao Zhong’s (小忠) mother managed to maintain a stable living environment after the divorce. The continuity of life soothed his feelings of insecurity and uncertainty.

Protective factor compensates for the damage that a risk factor caused

Some protective factors exerted their effect through making up for the damage caused by risk factors (see Figure 6-2).

Figure 6-2 A protective factor compensates for the damage that a risk factor caused



This protective mechanism differs from the first mechanism in terms of the consequence of the interaction between risk and protective factors. In the first mechanism, the risk factors were reduced, and thus the living environment for children turned to be less risky. In the mechanism here, risk factors and their negative impact still existed, yet protective factors compensated a child for the loss, hurt, or deprivation caused by certain risk factors.

A typical example is the “emotional support from kin and non-kin adults”. For Jiong Jiong (炯炯), a strong emotional connection with maternal relatives and “big dad” compensated for his distant relationship with father. Just as he told me that, “I felt it (divorce and the leaving of father) a pity”, yet I was gratified, I felt myself to be adequately cared and cherished (by the relatives and “big dad”).” Therefore, though the distant relationship with his father made him feel sad, he found comfort from other relatives and his “big dad”.

It is interesting to note that a particular protective factor may protect the children in more than one way. Quality mothering may be one of these protective factors. The mother’s sensitivity to the emotional needs of the informants and their concerns eliminated the risk of the children’s emotional distresses. It also made up for the damage caused by inadequate fathering, or even the father’s absence, by providing the informants their sense of being loved. In Xiao Fang’s (小芳) words, “a good mother compensate the loss of a unqualified father”, and thus, “With or without that person (her father), it means no difference for me.”

Summary

The rich life stories of children enlightened us with a comprehensive understanding of the possible protective factors in children's divorce adjustment. By comparing and contrasting the seven informants' individual experiences, this chapter serves to answer the two research questions raised in the beginning of the paper; i.e., what protects children against risks related to divorce and post-divorce life; and, how do these protective factors work? Findings of this study roughly provided answers to the two questions.

While some protective factors such as parental support, peer support, conducive coping strategies were compatible to Western findings, this study identified factors that seemed to be unique in Chinese context –financial support from kin and non-kin, and emotional support from maternal lineage relatives and a positive thinking of divorce. These findings also implied that protective factors in Chinese children's adjustment to divorce were influenced by social-cultural environment.

The study also contributes to our understanding of protective mechanism in the resilience process. Some protective factors directly reduce the risk factors, while others made up for what the child had been deprived of, and thus rendered these negative impacts of divorce less threatening for his/her normal development.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Contextual protective factors: resources and limitations

So far we have identified five common protective factors. Similar to Western findings, protective factors in this study could be found at individual, family and community levels. These protective factors are concentrated on the individual and family level, with inadequate supportive source in the community and school level.

Further scrutiny revealed that these protective factors should be understood in the particular cultural and structural context of Chinese society. The contextual characteristics not only explain the engenderment of some protective factors, but also determine their protective effects.

In this chapter, I shall discuss two contextual protective factors, that is, the more generous kin support and persistent gender difference in parenting, to illustrate how the socio-cultural context influence the protective factors, and analyze the limitations of these factors in the particular Chinese context.

The more generous and extensive kin support in comparison with the findings in the West

Support from the extended family members other than grandparents is a unique finding compared to those in the West. There was generous and extensive family support in the Chinese context. All the informants except An Jing depended heavily on kin support. There were much wider sources of support from uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. Even though most of the resident parents at the time of interviews were mothers, their maiden families readily accepted and included their children as family members.

Financial support was given without expectation of being repaid. These findings reflect that there is both continuity and change in traditional family values. Kinship support is still strong and highly valued in the participating post-divorce families, while the strong hold on the patriarchal system seems to be much loosened.

Limitations of the reliance on family and kin support in adjustment process

Despite the obvious benefits of extended-family support to the child, the pattern is not without limitations. Firstly, rapid changes in economic transformation have greatly transformed social and family relationships in China. Increasing work-related population mobility and the uprising capitalist ideologies that emphasize individual interests rather than family have weakened family network links (Yuen-Tsang, 1997; 李銀河, 2001). Though the exclusive dependence on familial support worked well in the past, it might turn to be more and more unreliable.

Secondly, the reliance on family and kin support resulted in a low motivation to develop support networks outside family among the informants. The individual had to solely rely on his/her own when the family network was weak or low functioning. Coping without external support, even if possible, would be stressful, especially for young children. With no one to share their burden, children may be pre-occupied with their adjustment issues. Excessive self-reliance and preoccupation of one's own adjustment could leave negative effects on the children's social development, as evidenced by An Jing's (安靜) experiences. Though she enjoyed the loneliness, she

also felt isolation from her classmates. She was a good student in academic performance and leadership ability, yet she did not know how to hang out with peers.

Persistent gender difference in parenting in post-divorce families

The results of this study reflected that supportive parenting was mostly rendered by mothers in a Chinese context. All informants showed high reliance on their mothers, regardless of which parent was the custodial parent. In contrast, the father was rarely mentioned as the source of warmth and support; in some cases unqualified fathers turned into a risk factor in the children's adjustment. What accounts for such a strong gender difference in post-divorce parenting?

Further analysis revealed that gender difference in parenting is related to a persistent gender role stereotyping in Chinese society. During marriage, women remained primarily responsible for the household chores and childcare, while men only played a peripheral role in the housework. Even though Shanghai men are known throughout China as "model husbands" who are willing to fulfill household duties, inequality in housework persisted among Shanghai couples: a woman spent an average of 3.67 hours on housework a day, 2.1 times that of her husband (徐安琪及劉汶蓉, 2003). This unequal sharing pattern in housework is common nationwide.

It is in continuity with the patriarchal system in traditional Chinese families to restrict women to the caregiving role within the family. Though the Communist government instituted a series of measures to raise the economic and social status of women in past decades, the implicit patriarchal values and practices were still very much embedded in the mind of the Chinese people (Yuen-Tsang, 1997). The findings

of “women status in Shanghai” in 2001 revealed that 36% of men were in strong approval of the traditional belief that “men’s place should be outside (the home), and women’s place should be inside (the home)”; the sample was composed of 1,921 participants from 18 districts of Shanghai (徐安琪及劉汶蓉，2003).

Negative impact of gender role stereotyping on post-divorce families

Gender role stereotyping has special implications in post-divorce households. It partly explained the financial strain in the residential mother-child households. During marriage, while women invested less in their career due to the heavy child care and housekeeping responsibilities (Bartfeld, 2000), the prevalent belief that females consumed more labor costs owing to pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare put women in a disadvantaged position in the job market. As a result, women earned less than their husband remained in a financially dependent position. The negative impact of women’s financial dependence on men was apparent after divorce - it caused financial difficulties in the residential mother-child household, as illustrated by Yan Yan (炎炎) and Jiong Jiong’s (炯炯)’s stories.

Inadequate residential fathering is another negative consequence of strong gender role stereotyping. The stereotyped role division in child care deprived fathers of the opportunity of interacting with their child and sharpening their parenting skills. Furthermore, it increases the likelihood of disengagement and limited involvement of the nonresident father in post-divorce parenting due to weak father-child bonding.

Physical and financial disengagement of the nonresident father were observed to have concrete negative impacts on post-divorce single parent households.

Unresolved risk factor: the inadequacy of the legal system

Despite the focus on protective factors in this study, I have to raise concern on a significant risk factor, that is, the inadequacy of the matrimonial legal system in China. Life stories of two informants have alerted us about the negative effects of the inadequate legal system on children's adjustment and the urgency for a betterment of the system.

Couples in China can obtain a divorce in two ways: agreement divorce and judicial divorce. The Matrimonial Ordinance provides that spouses may obtain a legal divorce by reaching a mutual agreement on property and child custody. In these uncontested divorces, whether or not the agreement reflects children's will is beyond consideration. Judicial divorce applies in contested cases where the couple fails to settle their disputes on the divorce itself or on the divorce arrangement. The final decision is up to the judicial ruling of the judge. As reflected by informants' experiences, the judge was usually indifferent to the children's opinions and interests in the divorce proceedings. Xiao Zhong (小忠) reported that the judge defied his desire to live with his mother and rewarded custody to his father. In the extreme case of An Jing, despite the alleged violence of her father, the judge failed to implement any effective

measures to protect An Jing and her mother. Worse still, the judge even put An Jing in danger of being abused by granting custody to her father.

Current legislation has been long criticized for its failure to safeguard the best interest of child in the decision of child custody arrangements (於晶，2005). According to Article 36 of the Matrimonial Ordinance, in the cases of parental agreement on the custody arrangement, the judge could make decisions for the best interests of children and parents. However, there are no operationalized guidelines or criteria in assessing and determining these interests. The vagueness in the meaning of “interests” provides judges considerable latitude for determining custody arrangements. The high level of reliance on the judge’s idiosyncratic style and personal bias to make decision is problematic, as Western experience implies (Wallace & Koerner, 2003).

The Ordinance also fails to deal with the situation when children’s interests might conflict with that of one or both parents. It reflects a fundamentally paternalistic orientation that parents, not children, are considered to be of primary importance in the divorce proceedings. Children’s voices are rarely considered in the proceedings that determine their fate. Furthermore, as revealed in the literature review, most of the research findings reflected the adults’ perspective. Judges are forced to rely on the adults’ interpretations of children’s needs. To what extent these interpretations are congruent with children’s experience and perceptions worth much inquiry.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed the protective factors that facilitate children's adjustment to parental divorce in a Chinese context. It provided useful knowledge for policy reform and development of services to mobilize and strengthen these protective factors at different levels. On the other hand, the identified limitations of some protective factors and the identified unresolved risk factors necessitate the development of specific services for children of divorce as well as their parents.

According to the above findings and discussions, recommendations at the ideological, structural and policy, and individual and family levels are discussed accordingly in this chapter. Recommendations at a research level have also been made at the end of the chapter.

Recommendations and interventions at ideological level

De-labeling divorce and post-divorce families

In de-labeling divorce, divorce should be conceptualized as a crisis in life but not necessarily leading to inevitable and incurable harm. Just as the research results revealed, children of divorce could be as healthy as their peers in intact families, but only if they are given adequate external support supplemented with internal strength. For parents, divorce can be a responsible choice if they work hard to provide an amicable, secure, and caring environment that counteracts the effects of risks of the marital breakup.

Besides this, post-divorce families should be understood as an altered form of a normal family that should be respected. Similar to a new marriage or parenthood, divorce could be conceptualized as an additional developmental stage in the family life cycle (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The family is not destroyed with divorce; the post-divorce family still involves the same members as parents who continue to participate in child rearing (Goldsmith, 1982). Yet a post-divorce family has transformed into a new form, as divorce disrupts the marital relationship (Nichols, 1988). These changes pose challenges to children and parents, such as the custody and residence arrangements, and cooperation in parenting, etc. External sources of support are needed to help post-divorce families deal with these challenges in the family transition process.

The de-labeling of divorce and post-divorce families enables us to remove the stigma of divorce while at the same time call for supportive services for those individuals and families in need. Public efforts should be better directed towards facilitating a “good divorce” (Ahrons, 1994), rather than discouraging or stigmatizing divorce, or enforcing the idealistic and unrealistic notion of staying in unhealthy and unhappy marriages “for the sake of the children”.

“Forever parenthood”

Although divorce necessitates the dissolution of the spousal relationship, it should not necessarily erase the parent-child relationships (Kruk, 1994). The concept of “forever parenthood” (Lau, 2004) should be extended to divorcing and divorced

couples as well as to the general public. “Forever parenthood” implies that the bond between parents and children is unbreakable despite divorce, and both parents should continue their responsibilities after divorce. It defeats the possible myth in a Chinese context that children are the possession of parents and that child custody arrangements are a decision of who has the right to own this possession. It should be especially noted to both parents that custody arrangements only prescribe which parent should take the primary responsibility in the daily care. Divorce and custody arrangements should not interfere with the parent-child relationship. Both custodial and non-custodial parents are expected to stay involved in their child’s life.

A more flexible gender role ideology

Continuous advocacy for a more flexible gender role ideology benefits both men and women, as well as their children regardless of the family arrangement. With a more flexible gender role ideology, parenting is not necessarily gendered. Child care should be a collaborative endeavor with responsibility shared by both parents. Mothers are not born mothers. Mothers take on a nurturing identity as a result of the care giving work they do (Ruddick, 1980). Men are able to develop and hone the skills of care-giving if they are given the opportunity to participate in the tasks of child care (Cowdery, Knudson-Martin, 2005). Fathers should be encouraged to get more involved in childcare. By taking direct responsibility for childcare tasks, men will develop, maintain, and consolidate a continually growing emotional connection with their children. It will facilitate the post-divorce involvement of the fathers with

the children regardless the custodial arrangement. Children will also benefit from the continuous parenting of both parents.

Moreover, a flexible gender role assignment has special implications for women in the work force. It calls for the equality in payment for men and women in employment, as well as an equal social recognition and acceptance on the career development of women. The equality in earning capability might alleviate the financial dependence of women and avoid the feminization of poverty in a single mother-child family.

Public education to induce ideological changes

Education is the most effective means to induce ideological changes, and mass media comes to be the most effective means to promote the positive messages of “forever parenthood”, flexible gender roles, as well as the de-labeling of divorce and post-divorce families. For flexibility in gender role ideologies, the most substantial change may be achieved through the general education system. Public education could also be conducted through organizing community activities, public lectures and seminars, and parent education programs in the community and schools. Distributing newsletters and pamphlets on these themes might help, too.

Recommendations and interventions at a structural and policy level

Improvement of the legal system

The “best interests of the child” should be an important criterion on which

contested child custody determinations are based (丁慧, 2000; Wallace & Koerner, 2005). Some scholars have made suggestions for the clarification of the criteria for “best interests of the child”. For instance, Xu (徐安琪, 2004) proposed that “the preferred custody arrangement should reward the parent with whom the child lived longer, and changing environment is obviously harmful to the child,” and, “In favor of the child, joint physical custody is permitted.” She also suggested that under situations where child or spousal abuse exists, the abusive parent should be refrained from obtaining the custody of the children.

With regard to the exclusion of the children’s voice and opinion in the divorce proceedings, it is highly recommended that listening to the children’s perspective on what serves their “best interests” should be clearly stated in the operation guidelines for the judge. To equip the judges with a child welfare perspective and knowledge about professions in family science and family systems and individual development, judicial training provided by specialists in family science is recommended (Wallace & Koerner, 2005). The inter-disciplinary approach that has been adopted in the West is also recommended. In this approach, social workers, psychologists, or other professionals provide their opinions and assessments upon child welfare issues and arrangement for the judge’s reference. Further, in Western practice the Family Advocate (FA) sees the children separately from the parents. After the best interests of the child have been determined, the FA serves as their representatives with parents and the judge (Scherrer & Louw, 2004). It is desirable if such a practice could be gradually developed in China.

Financial assistance for single-parent households in need

Despite of the identified general pattern of rich kinship support to the single parent households, some of the informants did experienced financial hardship. Thus financial assistance is suggested for single-parent households in need in helping them to maintain a sustainable living standard.

In addition to the necessary ideological change to realize the equality in economic resources for men and women and thus ensured single mother earned adequate income, effective means to enforce alimony payments should be examined for the development of a suitable enforcement system in China. For families in stringent financial difficulties, policies and interventions to ensure the economic well being of these families is essential.

Development of a “Caring Community”

Findings of the study suggest that while family support is an important cultural resource that we should preserve, there is a genuine need to expand the support networks to the extra-familial environment for children of divorce. It is suggested that we should make the best use of the existing resources in the community.

In addition to family support, community support at neighborhood level will further enhance the supportive network of the post-divorce households. Currently the residents' committee is the major provider of neighborhood service. It serves to implement the social welfare policy at a community level. It also provides some resident services (便民服務), such as bicycle parking and repairing, breakfast or meal

services, etc (Fung, Yeung & Lee, 2003). They are suggested to expand their services to address the needs of those households without inadequate family support For instance, the resident committee could establish a day-care and after-school-care center for children, in order to share the single-parents burden of child care, and thus encourage them to remain in the work force. Self-organized mutual help groups for divorcees also began to proliferate in Shanghai (Jin Yuejue, 2006). It is an encouraging development.

School is also a potential source of support for children as it is the major living environment for school-aged children. Findings of this study evidenced that positive school experiences and peer support promote positive adjustment of children with divorced background. Thus, supportive school environment and school-based supportive services are recommended.

It is expected that school, resident committee and other institutions in the community could join hands in assisting children as well as their parents to acquire new skills and resources when divorce has changed the landscape of their lives. Our ultimate goal is to cultivate a caring and supportive environment for post-divorce families.

Recommendations and interventions at individual and family levels

A resilience perspective to guide the practice

To guide the formulation of these services, a resilience perspective, as is supported

by the findings of this study, is recommended as the framework to guide the social service for post-divorce families in China. With a resilience perspective, helping professionals are advised to focus on their strength as a person and a family rather than merely focus on their divorce background and their difficulties. This perspective guides us to help the families by maximizing the protective factors and minimizing the risk factors in the family transition process.

A holistic model on the supportive services

A holistic model on the supportive services for post-divorce families is proposed. Practices to support children of divorce should not only provide services to individuals, but also address family functioning as well as the needs of building a supportive community. As the recommendation at the community level has been proposed above, in this section we focus on the services at the individual and family levels.

Parenting quality is identified to be significant factor in affecting children's adjustment. Development and preventive services to enhance the quality of post-divorce parenting from both the resident parents and the nonresident parents would be much beneficial to the children. With reference to social work practice in the West, divorce education for divorcing parents is a widely adopted means to facilitate quality post-divorce parenting (Garber, 2004; Mckenry, Clark & Stone, 1999; Shifflett & Cummings, 1999; Taylor, 2005). For parents who are still in antagonistic relationship such as in the case of An Jing (安靜), effective mediation is necessary.

Another area of service development that is indicated by the findings of the study is the facilitation of nonresident parents' involvement in the post-divorce families. . Non-resident fathers need to receive positive messages that their children will benefit from their involvement. Co-parenting should be encouraged in well-functioning divorcing couples; for the families who are unable to actively cooperate, parallel parenting may be the choice (Kissman, 2001). For whatever arrangement, skills of conflict management should be taught to both parents (Kissman, 2001).

Recommendations at the research level

It should be cautioned that the results of this study have explicated only some of the stories. This study is just a start. It opens up a new horizon for future research and indicates several areas that are worth further study.

Further studies on protective mechanism

This study provided only some preliminary findings on how protective factors work with risk factors and contribute to individual's positive adjustment. To have a more complete picture of resilience process and protective mechanism, further studies with a larger sample size are recommended to resolve remaining questions. For instance, what kind of risk factors activate what kind of protective factors, what is the interaction between background variables (age, year of divorce, age at parental divorce...) and protective factors, etc.

Group comparison to examine generalizability of the results

Including children of difference ages and examining the protective factors salient to their adjustment is recommended to examine the generalizability of research results. By comparing the data from pre-school, school-aged, and adult children of divorce, we could determine whether or not the protective factors identified in this study are unique or universal to all of the children. If the answer is Yes, we shall have a pattern for sources of protective factors in the general population of children from divorced families. If not, we shall gain some insight about how children's developmental stage influences the engenderment and function of protective factors.

Longitudinal design to explore protective factors in a particular developmental stage

As a retrospective study, the protective effects of the identified protective factors were established with the subjective perception of the informants; furthermore, some significant protective factors might be overlooked in a retrospective study owing to informants' memory losses. To establish the causal link of the existence of certain protective factors and children's positive adjustment to divorce, and to have a more accurate observation and record of these significant protective factors, further study with a longitudinal design is highly welcomed. Recruiting children at an earlier age, and conducting follow-up studies with the cohorts in a continuum of three to five years, is expected to differentiate the possible unique protective factors in different developmental stage of children.

Documenting needs for service and service effectiveness

As discussed in the above section, for the purpose of developing appropriate developmental and supportive services to strength the protective factors and reduce risk factors, it is recommended that practice research should be developed in China to inform development of evidence-based practices with children of divorce and post-divorce families.

When a holistic model has been proposed and intervention programs designed and carried into practice, both summative and formative evaluations are needed to examine the applicability and feasibility of this framework in the socio-political context of China. The evaluation will also help us identify the hindering factors and helping elements in the practice and inform us of the necessary modifications and improvements of supportive services. Further study should include the feedback of children, parents, and services providers.

Cost-effectiveness analyses of these programs are also recommended, so as to appeal to the concern of the government in the best use of limited public funds for the development of welfare services. The ultimate goal is to develop an indigenous model on working with children of divorce and post-divorce families in China. Relevant practice wisdom will be consolidated in this process through learning from children of divorce and their families, as well as the human service practitioners, including school counselors, teachers, and social workers.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Questions Guide for Intensive Interviews

1. 談到父母離婚，你首先會想到什麼？
2. 在離婚過程中及他們離婚之後，你有什麼經歷？
3. 你覺得父母離婚對你有影響嗎？
4. 若有，是好的影響還是壞的影響？
 - 若是壞的影響，你是用什麼方法處理這壞的影響？身邊有沒有什麼人或事情曾經幫到你？
 - 若是好的影響，是什麼情況讓這些好的影響發生？
 - 若果沒有影響，是什麼幫助你能不太受父母離婚影響？
5. 除此之外，適應父母離婚的各種變化有沒有經歷什麼困難？你覺得是什麼幫到你，克服困難，走到現在？
6. 能不能具體說說它們從哪些方面幫到你？
7. 總括而言，你會怎樣評價你目前的生活狀態與及你自己？

Appendix 2: Written Consent for Interviewee

一、本人同意／本人同意敝子女參與「香港中文大學社會工作學系」碩士生顧璿璿有關「離婚家庭子女適應過程的保護因素」之研究訪談；

二、本人／及敝子女同意在整個訪談過程中進行錄音，但此錄音資料只作研究之用，并在該論文完成後予以銷毀；

三、本人／及敝子女同意研究者以不記名方式使用訪談資料，作為其論文的分析依據；

四、本人／及敝子女知道在訪談過程中可以不回答研究者的提問，甚至隨時終止接受訪問；

五、本人／及敝子女知道可以要求閱讀有關訪談紀錄和研究分析結果及論文；

六、本人／及敝子女在瞭解此次研究目的的基礎上，同意接受訪談，并對以上內容作出承諾，願意簽署本同意書。

同意書簽署人姓名：_____（如受訪者為未成人士，須由家長作簽署人）

同意書簽署人簽名：_____（如受訪者為未成人士，須由家長作簽署人）

受訪者姓名：_____

簽署日期：_____年_____月_____日

Appendix 3: The List of Codes

Protective factors	Protective mechanism	Risk factors
Love and concern from one parent	Compensate	Inadequate parenting of another parent
	Reduce	Emotional distress
Financial support from kin and non-kin adults	Reduce	Financial hardship
Emotional support from kin and non-kin adults	Compensate	Distant relationship with non-resident parent
Peer companions	Reduce	Emotional distress
Capabilities in coping with lingering pain and sorrow	Reduce	Emotional distress
		Inadequacy of legal system

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